

“Up in Flames”

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Fire Communion

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reflection: “Up in Flames”

"Remember: only you can prevent forest fires."

How many of you have heard this before?
Phew, I'm not alone!

I thought it was only an American thing,
until I learned recently that Smokey the Bear
has been part of the Canadian Forestry Association,
as well as the U.S. Park Service.

He's worked on both sides of the border.

I'm even told on highest authority that he was a Canadian bear....

And his memorable message was a staple of my childhood,
a warning seared into my brain for what seems years
as my brothers and I would watch Saturday morning cartoons
or afterschool specials on TV.

In animated Public Service Announcements,
the friendly, furry bear
told us to be careful whenever out in the woods,
and to do all we could to prevent a campfire or a picnic BBQ
from turning into a raging forest fire.

Looking back, it now seems a little silly that I was part of the target audience,
since, as a kid, I wasn't usually the one put in charge
of fire management on camping trips anyway.

Though starting the lessons with the young
certainly helps to get the message across for a lifetime.

That message, though, has had to be updated in recent years,
as we've come to understand so much more about the important role
that fires play in the healthy life-cycle of any forest.

As it turns out, forests need fires to remain healthy.

And, so, Smokey's message has changed over the past two decades.

He now warns us against starting *accidental* wildfires.

That's an important, vital difference.

Not all fires are bad or devastating.
Many trees in a forest need the heat of a fire
to force open their cones so that their seeds can be released into the forest.

That's how forests often bring about new life.

But if fire in a forest is suppressed by human intervention for too long,
too much organic material—too much leafy undergrowth—
builds up, so that when a fire does eventually break out,
the fire burns longer and stronger than it ever would naturally,
and can take out the vital canopy of leaves at the top of the tree line
that can then wipe out a forest for a very long time.

As we take up this month's theme of resilience,
I'm struck by how much we humans are like forests.

It can be tempting to avoid fire at all costs,
to do everything we can to suppress what we find painful.

Yet we need the fires of life to challenge us,
to refine us, to heat us up, to bring forth new life,
as the seeds of new possibility take root
in what we thought would surely be the end of us.

We need the little fires of life so that we learn

how to deal with the adversity
that is simply part of the bargain of being alive.

For when we're spared too much struggle,
we become all the more vulnerable
when heartache or hardship come our way.

It turns out that we need practice at struggle,
if we are to build up our capacity to rebound.

To come to know that we have it within us to withstand the fires of life,
and even become stronger because of them.

As we relinquish to the past what no longer serves us,
let us hold on to the lessons about resilience
that we've won through our struggles.

And let us embrace those lessons, and the internal strength they reveal,
as we look forward to the days of our life that are yet to come.

Amen.