

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

July 13, 2025

# Fire: Burning Bright

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: July 13, 2025

### Introduction

This morning, we continue our series exploring the four philosophical elements—earth, water, fire, and air.

When we talk about God, we must use metaphors and poetry, because as much as God is present with us, God is beyond our understanding and our words. The writers of Scripture, too, needed metaphors to express their encounters with a living God. And they reached for the four elements to speak about God in a tangible way. The elements are ever-present, life-sustaining, and powerful—hinting at the creator behind them. Fire, our element for this week, appears over 600 times in Scripture.

Perhaps you carry fear-filled images of fire— destructive, that which levels to the ground everything in its path, torturous, even.

Yet, too, we know fire to bring warmth, to give light, to create beauty, to gather community, and to provide nourishment. Fire is a multilayered metaphor and physical reality in Scripture and in our lives.

But as Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel of John:  
“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy.

But I have come that they might have life, and have it in abundance.”

(John 10:10)

Destruction is not God’s plan for you or for the world God’s loves.

Keep this in mind as we explore fire, through the encounter of Moses and a peculiar burning bush. But first, please join me in prayer.

### **Prayer for Illumination**

Holy God,

Your Word is a light to our path,  
blazing with truth, power, and life.

As we turn now to Scripture, stir within us a holy curiosity.  
Quiet our distractions, open our hearts,  
and help us to hear your voice calling us by name. Amen.

### **Scripture**

Exodus 3:1-6

3 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

### Glass Blowing

Back in the 2010's, if you took a walk on Butler St. in Lawrenceville, you would have eventually come upon a surprising and delightful sight. A cute storefront, with big glass windows, and inside a woman, perched on a stool with a bulldog laying nearby, carefully shaping, molding, turning glass through a flame of over 2000 degrees.

Gerbe Glass was one of my favorite shops to visit when I was a church-planting pastor in Lawrenceville. Not only because of the incredible, delicate, creative works of art inside. But mostly because of the glass artist herself, Bernadette. She shared not only the art, but the process. She showed any passerby how powerful, yet precise fire could be. How a force so often viewed as destructive could be the catalyst for creating something new. And if you stopped in, to say hello, and give Tank the dog a pet, Bernadette was as generous with her time as with her artistry.

As I thought and prayed about fire— and why God so often, and in such central stories like Exodus 3, appears amid the flames— what kept coming to mind was this image of Bernadette, patiently sitting in front of the heat of her torch, molding delicate glass into one-of-a-kind pieces of art.

What can be created when we learn to not pull away, to not look away, to not fear, but instead find God in the fire? We find this question echoed as God appears to Moses from within a burning bush.

## **Moses and That Strange Bush**

Moses had fled to Midian after he had killed an Egyptian overseer. Ignited by seeing one of his own people, enslaved, oppressed, and abused, he murdered this man, hoping his acts would go unseen. But they quickly came to light, and Pharaoh sought to kill Moses— so he ran.

He found a home in Midian, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, in self-imposed exile— safely away from Pharaoh, yet also away from his home and his people, who remained in slavery.

Here, Moses meets God.

There is, Exodus says, a flame of fire out of a bush. This is the only time in the Hebrew Bible the word is used for, “flame.” It is peculiar. A flame that burns on its own. Exodus goes on to describe what Moses sees as he draws closer. The bush was blazing yet was not consumed—like glass turning in the flame. Yet, a bush ought to be burned up.

Wouldn't you stop and move closer, too?

Out of the bush, God calls to Moses, “The place on which you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” The blaze still burning, Moses hides his face, afraid to look at God in the fire.

What Moses does not yet realize, what will take him a long time to trust, is that God is not there to destroy him or do him

harm. The bush is burning but not consumed, not destroyed, not turned to ash. Even in the fire, God preserves, protects, and sustains life...including Moses' life. But the fire— and God— will also not leave Moses to remain, unchanged, where he is, how he is in that moment.

God's calls Moses.

It begins with a reminder of who God is. A reminder of God's promise, of covenant. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God who sees, as Hagar once called the Lord, the God who wrestles with humans, as Jacob discovered. The Holy God who created the very ground where Moses stands. A God who makes and keeps promises.

From the fire, Moses is reminded who God is.

Then from the fire, Moses learns who he is called to be. In exile, Moses carried the guilt of murder, the shame of leaving his people to suffer, and the fear of Pharaoh enacting revenge. My guess, though, is that Moses was able to push these aside most of the time to get on with his day-to-day life in Midian. He could stifle the fire within him simply by believing that he was powerless to do anything else. What could he possibly do to change the situation in Egypt? Here he could tend sheep, provide for his family, and keep his head down to live a quiet life.

God will call Moses to do much more than this. God will call Moses to let the excuses, fears, and powerlessness burn

away— not to destroy him— but to fan the fire within him for his own freedom and the freedom of God’s people.

### **The God of Fire in Scripture**

Throughout Scripture— in the prophets, in wisdom literature, in poetry and story, in the Gospels— fire refines and burns away that which is not valuable, beautiful, good. We think about fire an image of God’s judgment, but what is burned by fire? The sin that does harm to what God has made very good in the world—injustice, hatred, cruelty, the other gods we put before the one true God.

Fire burns away what holds God’s people back from reflecting of God’s love, justice, and hope. It fans the flames within God’s people to be a blessing to the world.

It blazes but does not consume.

God appeared in a pillar of fire to lead the people from the desert to the promised land. The Holy Spirit met Christ’s followers in the upper room with a rush of wind and flame, and suddenly they could proclaim the gospel from Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stood in the fire of an unjust king’s rage—but they were not destroyed. God stood with them, protecting them from the flames, vindicating their faithfulness.

John the Baptist preached a fire of judgment that burns away the chaff—what once protected but no longer nourishes—leaving only what is good to be gathered in.

God's fire blazes but does not consume.

From the fire, God reminds us who God is—and who we are called to be.

### **Gathering Around the Fire**

We know many of these stories of God's presence in the flames— fittingly, because they were passed down generation to generation around the fire, at the hearth, where the community gathered to remember who God is and who they are called to be.

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I'm going to pause and take a hard turn for a moment. As more stories have emerged from Texas about the catastrophic floods that took the lives of 120 people, with many still missing, and did untold damage to the homes and communities of survivors, my heart has broken for all of it. But especially for the children, staff, and families involved at Camp Mystic. I think anyone who has been a part of camp ministry feels a particular connection to this tragedy— knowing the depth of community, the joy and silliness, the profound experience of God's presence that camp can create. It's with tenderness, and I hope honor and care, that I bring up summer camp in this sermon. Because camp ministry has been so on my heart and mind these past days.

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My own summer camp experience was relatively brief. I worked as a counselor for three summers in Ligonier. But those summers significantly shaped who I am, as a person and as a pastor.

Ligonier Camp had a closing bonfire at the end of each session. All the counselors, administrative staff, and campers would gather on a big hill for a very big campfire. Flames much taller than me. We would gather, sing, hear Scripture and a message that reminded us again who God is and who we are called to be, and then stand in a giant 200-300 person circle with candles, our own flames, to take back into the world.

I realize now that we were stepping into a tradition as old as Moses. Around fires, God's people have heard again and again who God is—and who we are called to be.

These campfire stories have called prophets, poets, preachers, and children of God across vocations to allow God burn away their excuses, fears, and powerlessness, and to fan the flame within them to do the work and to be the people God created them to be.

### **Don't Fear the Flames**

We do not need to fear the fire of God.

Whether the fire of trials, or judgment for where we have gone astray, or light in our dark, uncertain wandering, or the fire of passion ignited in our hearts, God is amid the flames.

The same God who sees, the God who wrestles, the God who keeps promises to lead us to abundant life, we find sitting on a stool, bent over the flames, creating beauty from the heat.

The fire of God blazes but does not consume. God calls out of the flames to remind us who God is for us and to remind us who we are called to be.

Friends, God still speaks from within the fire.

So, let it burn—

the regrets we cling to, the anger that corrodes,  
the fear that freezes us in place, the biases we once believed  
would shield us.

What once protected now holds us back.

Like chaff in the wind—

*Trust God's judgment. Let it burn.*

Let it burn—

the illusion of control, the polished image, the brittle need to  
be right.

Like glass in the flame, like silver in the heat—

Through the trials, God creates beauty, builds community,  
refines the soul.

And even in the fire, we are never alone.

*Trust God's workmanship. Let it burn.*

Let it burn—

the spark for justice, the ache for compassion, the holy fire  
that stirs within.

Don't smother it. Don't hide it.

Feed it with kindling, build it to blaze.

Let it light the way for others—

that they might see, and glorify God.

*Trust God's call. Let it burn.*

May we not fear the flames but remember who God is and listen for God's call of who we are to be.

Amen.

### **Charge and Benediction**

I am going to lean into my camp counselor past this week for the charge. Go light a fire. A literal fire. If you cannot light a campfire in your yard, light a candle in your home. Look into the flame, and ask God—What are you saying through the fire to me today?

What needs to be burn away?

What feels like it is on fire in your life that you need the reminder that you are not alone?

What justice, compassion, hope burns within you that you need to kindle?

God still speaks to us in the fire.

So may we trust in this blessing:

That the love of God Father, the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit go with us today and always. Amen.





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