

Smoke-jumpers are the firefighters who parachute into remote areas to combat fires where it is hard to send regular fire-fighting equipment. In 1949, fifteen smoke-jumpers parachuted into a remote area of Montana named Mann Gulch. Due to the tinder-like conditions, and a shift in the wind, the manageable fire they began to fight at the bottom of a gulch flared into a blaze. As a result the hand tools they brought with them quickly proved inadequate, and they began to retreat back up the ridge to the spot where their parachutes had landed.

Unlike almost everything else in nature, however, fire travels faster uphill than downhill. So while the smoke-jumpers were moving back up the hill as fast as they could, the fire caught up to them. In desperation, the team leader decided to risk trying an unproven method of fire control. He stopped running, turned toward the fire, and started a fire of his own, a - so called 'safety fire' - between him and the advancing blaze. Most of the team thought he had gone crazy, and continued to run up toward the hilltop as fast as they could. But two of the men fell in behind their team leader, and hunkered down with him in their safety zone as the fire swept around them and up the hill - where it caught up to, and killed, the others.

I don't know if that led to the phrase "*fight fire with fire*," but it certainly is a fitting description of what that team leader did. It is also a good description of what we need to do survive the spiritual fires that rage around us in this world. To see this, we need to look at the way that the Bible uses the word fire. The word FIRE appears in the Bible 67 times. And in these 67 usages, we hear God tell us two things.

First, God tells us that the symbol of fire represents His presence. We see this in the book of Exodus. In chapter three, we are told how Moses was tending sheep when "*the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.*" In response, Moses moved closer, and when God spoke to Him from the bush he entered into a conversation with God about leading the Israelites out of Egypt. The burning bush caught his attention not just because it was a unique incident, but because Moses knew that there had been incidents in the history of his people where fire had been a symbol of God's presence. In Genesis 3, for instance, we are told how after Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden, God placed angels "*and a flaming sword flashing back and forth*" at the entrance to the garden to prevent them from returning.

The point of that passage was that God Himself - symbolized in the flaming sword - was going to keep them from returning. As God later worked with Abraham to make him the father of many nations, He showed up one night to comfort Abraham. This comfort was in the form of Abraham seeing a vision of a "*smoking fire pot with a blazing torch*" before him in the darkness.

In that imagery, Abraham realized that God was telling him that He was with him, and He would surely see him through his difficulties. And, lest we forget that God is not always present just in merciful ways but also sometimes to carry out judgement, there is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and how God's judgement rained down from heaven in the form of fire.

Seeing God's presence symbolized in fire didn't end with Moses, however. After Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, they created a tabernacle to worship God in the wilderness. Each time the tabernacle was set up, a pillar of cloud would hover over it during the day, and "*from evening until morning the cloud . . . looked like fire.*" After the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they began to find it hard to follow God's ways. As they encountered other religions, they were tempted to follow them too - instead of following only the one true God.

To remind the Israelites that God was present with them even when they were tempted to stray, we are told in the book of Kings that Elijah did something dramatic. He set up a pile of wood for a sacrifice, dowsed the wood with water, and called down fire down from heaven. The book of Kings tells us the people responded by crying out "*The Lord - He is God!*"

Second, God tells us that the symbol of fire represents His leading. We see this in Exodus when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. For as he did so, we are told that "*by day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.*" When they reached Sinai, the place where God was going to give them the Ten Commandments, we are told that they saw that "*Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord [had] descended on it in fire.*" In those passages, we see that God was doing more than just begin present with His people. He was leading them. And that leading was more than just from one physical location to another.

For while God was leading them out of Egypt to a place called 'The Promised Land,' the real blessing God was trying to bestow upon them was to lead them to a better way to live. We see this in the passage from Matthew that I read. It told us that when John the Baptist began to preach, he called people to repentance. And he did so, he said, because God Himself would soon be coming, and He would want to see that they had already made strides toward living a better life than they had been living. But, John went on to say, since God knew that they would not be able to live out the kind of life they were called to live, God would - when He arrived - baptize them, with both "*the Holy Spirit and fire.*"

The imagery of fire there is that of a smelter taking an impure metal and placing it in an oven to remove the impurities. Which is why the gospel story does not end with the words of John the Baptist. Or even with the words of Jesus. The gospel story continues into the book of Acts. For on the day of Pentecost, the disciples were in an upper room speaking to God in prayer about His presence and leading when the Holy Spirit came upon them like "*the blowing of a violent wind,*" filling the house where they were meeting, and coming to rest on each of them in what Luke calls "*tongues of fire.*" From there the disciples went on in the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit to let God lead them to change the world.

Receiving the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, and following God's leading, is not something that happens automatic however. We must actively look for the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, in our lives, and in our world. We must actively listen for what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in the events that occur in our lives. And then we need, in the power the Holy Spirit offers us, to

go out and do what we have been told to do - now and in the future. This is because there is only one force powerful enough to snuff out the fires that engulf our world - a life ablaze for God. For that to happen, however, we must learn to FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE.

Learning to fight fire with fire doesn't mean using the violent ways of this sinful world in equal measure however. It doesn't mean that when something bad happens to us that we retaliate in equally bad ways. And it certainly doesn't mean deviating from being followers of the "Prince of Peace" to being purveyors of violence and destruction. We see this in the earthly life of the Prince of Peace when He chastised James and John for wanting to call down fire from heaven on a village that did not show Him hospitality, and when He rebuked Peter for pulling a sword on those who came to arrest Him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

What learning to fight fire with fire does mean is learning how to battle the spiritual fires which seek to devour us with the fire of God's presence and leading. A number of years ago, this was spoken about at a youth retreat in Delaware. Over 2,000 teenagers and chaperones had gathered there to hear a speaker named Justin Luckadoo. Justin is a character. He stated in his opening presentation that he is the unofficial spokesman for the ADD generation. And he proved it over the course of the weekend. As he spoke, however, his main point was simple. He said that if we want to be the kinds of people who not only survive the spiritual fires of this world, but also the kinds of people who - through the power of God - battle and extinguish them (in our lives, and in the lives of others), we need to be on fire for God. And to be on fire for God, Justin explained, we must build our lives around three simple words: IS IT HOLY?

At the end of the weekend, having explained how God calls us to be holy, Justin went on to say that UNDERSTANDING what it means to be holy is not the problem for most Christians. The problem for most Christians, he said, is being willing to LIVE in holy ways. This is because we often already know what it MEANS to live a holy life. We just don't WANT to do so.

We don't want to make time to pray daily. We don't want to make time to be in worship weekly. We don't want to regularly read and study our Bible. And we do not WANT to make time to fellowship with other Christians, sacrificially give of our time, talents, and treasure, or give of ourselves in service to others. But, Justin then explained, God says we must make the time to be "*about our Father's business*" in these ways if we want to be on fire for Him.

As we gather together to worship God this morning, this reality may be more important than it has been at any other point in recent memory. This is because fighting fire with fire AS GOD DEFINES it calls for bold and strenuous action. But it is not the bold and strenuous action of violence, hatred, or retaliation. It is the bold and strenuous action of living a holy life in such a visible way that we create what the smoke-jumpers call "a safety fire."

For when we allow God to smelt away the impurities of our lives, and lead others to do be about that same process of seeking to become holy, we begin to not only see the presence of God and leading of God in our lives, but also begin to be a witness to those around us. And when we begin to be such

a witness, great things happen - in our community, in our nation, and in our world. Let us, then, choose this day to fight fire with fire, not as the world does, but according to the calling of God. Your life, and our world, will never be the same if you do.