Run the Race: A Consuming Faith

Hebrews 12:18-29

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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 At the start of every modern Olympics, since 1928, the Olympic flame is lit. Officially, the Olympic flame is a symbol for the entire Olympic experience, which promotes the values of peace and harmony as the world gathers to celebrate the ongoing human drive for perfection and the purity of athletic competition. Often, the lighting of the Olympic flame is the climax of the Olympics’ opening ceremonies, and the moment of lighting is of tremendous significance to how the host country wants to present the tenor of the games. Sometimes, a famous athlete lights the flame, as Muhammed Ali did in 1996 or Wayne Gretsky in 2010. Other times, an inspiring or symbolic person has the honor of lighting the Olympic flame; in 1964 in Tokyo, for example, Japanese runner Yoshinori Sakai lit the flame – 19 years after he was born in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, the same day Hiroshima was destroyed by the first atomic bomb. And of course, especially in recent years, the Olympic hosts have attempted to find memorable ways of lighting the Olympic flame. Barcelona lit the flame with an archer, Lillehammer with a ski jumper, and Beijing with a literal high-wire act. The lighting of the Olympic flame is a moment of drama and celebration that marks the start of each Olympiad.

 Fire has fascinated human beings for millennia. Whether for warmth, cooking, or light, fire has many practical benefits that help humans survive in a sometimes-harsh world. But fire means more to us than just a source of heat or an aid to seeing in the dark. Fire has an almost mystical effect on us, whether we are entranced by a fireworks display, drawn to a bonfire, or calmed by a simple candle. Whether a flickering spark or a blazing fire, the flickering edges of a flame captures our minds and stirs something deep within our souls. No wonder fire has become a symbol for so much in our Western culture: the passion for competition and achievement, the purity of innocence and youth, the burning of anger and wrath, the torment of pain and punishment. This elemental emblem continues to speak to us on an almost instinctual level.

 This is nothing new. In the days when the Bible was written, fire also was a symbol used by many speakers and writers to drive their point home and awaken their readers’ and hearers’ imaginations. And as we read the stories of Scripture, we may often be led to believe that the fire often used as a symbol of God or God’s action is a fire of punishment. After all, Genesis tells us of Sodom and Gomorrah being demolished by sulfur and fire from the Lord. Periodically, fire became an expression of God’s anger and judgment, falling from heaven to destroy evildoers. Two of Jesus’ followers, James and John, wanted to call down fire from heaven on cities that didn’t welcome them. And of course, in the final book of the Bible, the lake of fire is reserved for the devil and all of those who are not found in the Book of Life. There are times in the Bible when fire is a symbol of judgment and punishment.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 The overwhelming majority of the time, however, the writers of Scripture do not use the image of “fire” as an image of punishment or torment. Indeed, often it is a symbol of the very presence of God, either in a burning bush, a pillar of fire, or a tongue of flame.[[2]](#footnote-2) There is something about being in the presence of God that evokes a sense of being in the presence of a fire: something that is full of heat, casting light into the darkness, roaring, untamable, yet irresistible. No wonder, then, that the author of Hebrews uses this primal symbol – fire – to describe God at the end of our passage today. Yet he offers a bit of clarification: our God isn’t just a fire, our God is a *consuming* fire.

 This is an interesting image, isn’t it? What does the author mean when he calls God a consuming fire? What is it that God consumes? And what does that have to do with us? All of this, I believe, is tied in with the other dominant – perhaps *the* dominant – way that the Holy Scriptures use the image of fire: fire is not about punishment, but about purification.

 About five and a half years ago, my wife and I got married. On that day, we made some promises and listened to some Scripture and shared communion together. Many of you were there, and we were delighted you could be with us on our special day. One other thing we did was exchange rings. This is mine: a 14 karat gold wedding band. That number, 14 karat, tells us something: it is a gold band, to be sure, but not pure gold. In the mix with that gold are some other metals, some silver or zinc or nickel or the like. These other metals are mixed in, and if I gave you my ring, you couldn’t separate those impurities out – unless you put it over fire.

 Fire has been used to refine metals almost since we first became interested in shiny things that we dug up from the earth. A section of ore is put in a crucible and placed over a flame; as the temperature goes up, the solid metal eventually turns to liquid. Any impurities – sediment, rock, other, less-precious metals – float to the top and are scooped out. What is left is the prized gold or silver or platinum, as pure as you want it to be. The rest – all the dross, all the trash, all the impurities – have been separated in this consuming fire.

 This is the image the author of Hebrews brings to mind here in this passage: that somehow, when God is at work in our lives, he is that consuming fire. His love and his righteousness, his power and his mercy, his holiness and his justice are kindled within us…and anything that is not of God is burned away, consumed. When we have a consuming faith in God, it transforms us in powerful ways, just as fuel is transformed by fire.

 But just what is consumed? What does the fire of consuming faith in our lives burn away? Our initial response might be to say that God’s burning presence within us scalds away our sins and cleans house, so to speak. Yet this is a bit too simplistic. As one commentator said, “Suppose, for example, you are gossipy, or a drunkard, or an embezzler, or a tax cheat. How would God’s fire make you different? You would simply be the same old rascal with third-degree burns.”[[3]](#footnote-3) To say that God’s presence and our commitment to him clears out the sins in our lives is like saying we went to the doctor with an infection and were only treated for sniffles: we treat the symptoms, not the underlying cause of our disease.

 Instead, the same scholar goes on to say, “the fire of God must consume something in each of us that goes deeper than our sins. God’s fire must purge away the *false self* from which our worst sins arise. The self that God created can emerge only as the self that I construct…is consumed.”[[4]](#footnote-4) There is something in us that is the perverted or broken image of who God created us to be – a slapdash repair that we’ve done on our lives that leaves us with holes and walls and deep, dark places that we don’t visit very often and blind spots that we delude ourselves about. And out of this self that we’ve made, however pain-wracked or selfish or stubborn or deluded it is, out of this false self comes everything that separates us from God and tears us apart from one another.

 That’s why God wants to light a consuming faith in each of us – because this false self is what the fire of God’s love and power destroys within us, leaving behind only the good, whole person that he made each of us to be. This is what the author of Hebrews is getting at near the end of the passage: “At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Somehow, when we embrace the covenant Christ made for us through his blood, when we invite God to take up residence within us, God’s consuming fire shakes out everything in us that is not of his kingdom – and leaves everything that cannot be shaken, everything that is of heaven.

 Indeed, if we are seeking that which is described in this passage – a place in God’s kingdom, described here by the image of Mt. Zion and the heavenly festival – then we need to let God’s consuming fire catch hold in our life of faith. Each of us, if we are honest with ourselves, has something in us that we need God to shake loose – at least, if we really want to live the sort of life Jesus lived, the sort of life God created us to live in the first place. And if we truly want to inherit the kingdom God has promised – the kingdom that will not be shaken, because it is the kingdom God always intended – then we need to let that something be purged from within us.

 But, oh, how difficult it is! The person we are, shaped by our struggles and our pain, our joys and our habits, our preferences and our fears – that person is comfortable, and is often adapted for surviving in this fallen world. And yet…we weren’t made for this fallen world, we were made for a redeemed world. We were made for Mt. Zion – and we need a faith that can get us there, a faith that shakes out all the things in life that draw us away from or drive a wedge between us and God. We need a consuming faith.

 That can be painful, because it means looking at our lives intently. We have to measure who we are and what we’re all about with the life Jesus holds out as our example – and then we have to be honest about those places where we’ve gone in a different direction or hold tight to values that just aren’t the values of Christ. And then…we have a choice. Will we continue to go through life seeking our own comfort and pleasure or ignoring our own frailties and brokenness…even if it means explaining away the teachings of God, the responsibilities of the covenant Christ has made with us? Or will we make the sacrifice that Christ calls us all to make, letting God’s holy presence consume all that is in us that is not of him?

 Celebrated Baptist preacher Tony Campolo spent most of his adult life teaching sociology at Eastern University, the undergraduate school associated with the seminary where I completed my doctoral work. Tony tells the story of a father who dragged his son into Tony’s office one day and started letting Tony know just how disappointed he was. “I sent my boy to college to get a good education, to make something of himself,” the father said, “and people like you got his head turned around. Look at him now. He’s doing mission work. He’s out on the streets with drug pushers and streetwalkers. He’s given his money to poor old ladies. He’s living like a pauper and all he cares about is reaching out to the losers of the world.” Quite worked up, the father paused, took in a deep breath, then growled out, “Don’t get me wrong, Campolo, I don’t know mind being Christian – *up to a point!*”

 Aren’t we all that way? Aren’t we all ready and willing to be Christians – up to a point? For most of us, that point is usually when following Jesus starts to cost us something, something we value, something we cherish. It might be our money or our status. It might be our worldview or our prejudices. It might be our comfort or our naiveté. It might even be our religious traditions. Whatever it is, it comes not from God – it comes from the false self we have made, the part of us that is not consistent with the life God created us to live. Will we embrace a faith that lets God shake those parts of us lose? Will we embrace a faith that lets God purify us with his love and justice? Will we embrace a faith that seeks only a kingdom that will not be shaken? Will we embrace a consuming faith? Let us pray.

1. Genesis 19:24, Exodus 9, Numbers 16:35, Luke 9:54, Revelation 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exodus 3:2, Exodus 13:21, Acts 2:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. FotW, 378 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. FotW, 378 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hebrews 12:26-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)