

Crispy Faith

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 23, 2016
Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7

In February of 2013 a very unusual television show was broadcast in Norway, the likes of which it would be difficult to imagine on our television screens here in the United States. The television show, the first of its kind in Norway, was a 12 hour television special focusing on – logs burning in a fireplace. I'm not kidding. Over 20% of the population of Norway or a million people tuned in to at least part of this broadcast exploring what is known as the fire culture of Norway. The first four hours of the 12 hour broadcast was a more typical television special, exploring different techniques of chopping wood, stacking wood, how different approaches to fire construction mattered and why it was so important to the people of Norway. Then, the focus of the show shifted to the fire itself – a log fire burning in a fireplace in a farmhouse somewhere in the country side. Eight hours of watching this fire burn, complete with sound. As logs were added the fire would crackle and hiss, forever changing as fires do. Eight hours. Holy cow.

In her article for the *New York Times* on this phenomenon, Sarah Lyall interviewed several people who watched the show. People in Norway were enthralled by it. In the first hour of the

burning fire part of the show, Facebook posts and tweets went wild, critiquing how the firewood had been stacked – apparently it’s a big deal in Norway if the firewood is stacked bark up or bark down. But other viewers just savored every minute of the show as what it was – a burning fire in a fireplace and everything that comes with it except the smell of course. One woman explained her fascination with the show like this – “it was calming and exciting at the same time. When would they add another log? What would happen when they did? How would the fire change in the next moment?”

Maybe we wouldn’t watch a television program about a burning fire in a fireplace for eight hours, but most of us do enjoy sitting by a fire. The most popular workshop at last Sunday’s youth event at Irons Homestead was how to start and control an outdoor firepit fire. And when our Mission Trips stayed out at Irons for two summers straight we would end those long August days sitting by the fireplace in the pavilion, watching those logs burn as we talked over the day. Fire is just part of us, part of who we are as human beings. It draws us in for reasons we can’t quite explain even as we know how dangerous fire can be.

That’s the funny thing about fire. We humans literally have a love/hate relationship with it. We love it when we can control it. That firepit fire on a beautiful autumn night, that campfire just perfect for toasting marshmallows after a summer day of fun, that

roaring fireplace making us warm and cozy as we watch old movies on a winter's afternoon – these are the fires we love, the times we savor as the embers glow, the wood crackles and the tiny little sparks float away into nothingness. But we are terrified of fire we it's not under our control. We know all too well how deadly it can be. Who isn't afraid of a house fire? Who doesn't cringe when we hear about those out of control wildfires in the West? We can't imagine being chased from our homes by a fire! How terrifying!

This fear of fire, this healthy respect for both the good it can do and the destruction it can cause so quickly and so completely, is what makes Isaiah's use of the fire image so very powerful in the text we read this morning. This particular text comes from the part of Isaiah known as "Second Isaiah" because it is clearly being written in a completely different historical situation from the first part of the book. By this time, the Babylonian captivity has ended and the Israelites are in the process of being restored to Jerusalem and the lands surrounding it. This text is one of reassurance – "do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine," Isaiah writes. Powerful words to a people trying to recover and rebuild what they had lost. It's going to be okay, is what God is saying to them, Isaiah wants the people to know. He continues on explaining how this can be so: "when you pass through the waters I will be with you." These words are to remind

them of how God delivered them from Egypt when Moses led them through the Red Sea. That's pretty clear. But then come words more surprising. "When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame cannot consume you." But when did we walk through fire, the people might wonder. The thing is they didn't – but Moses did, on their behalf. Well, he didn't walk through the fire. He was drawn to turn aside from his comfortable life because of a fire – a fire he saw from a distance when a bush burned without being consumed. And Moses was the one who led them through the waters. He could do this because Moses had faith – faith enough to encounter God in a burning bush. Faith enough to lead the people through the Red Sea as the waters stacked up so they could flee the pursuing Egyptians. Faith enough for all of them.

I need you to reclaim that faith, that trust in me, God is saying to the people – that's Isaiah's message. Isaiah wanted his people and us as well to believe that God knows what is happening to us and God cares! God is not immobilized within our historical and political/social context nor is God indifferent to our sufferings as God's beloved people. God was not indifferent to the cries of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. God was not indifferent to the crushing disappointment of the Israelites languishing in captivity in Babylon. God is alive and active in history, our history, then and now. That is the message of Isaiah to the

ancient Israelites and that is his message to us. Isaiah dared to believe that our God is a God of action in human history, even if not especially when God can seem most distant. Isaiah taught the people to look for God everywhere, not just in the Temple, not just in their own homes in Palestine, not just in the hill country where their faith was born. Isaiah taught them that their God was the God of the whole world and everything in it – the God of history, the God of the past, the present and the future. That’s a powerful lesson. That’s a vitally important lesson, and one we too often lose sight of.

And we do lose sight of it because it’s oh so easy to do. We love God, yes, but in carefully controlled ways sort of like we love a crackling fire. God is part of our lives in specific ways – like church on Sunday mornings and personal prayer disciplines we may have throughout the week. We call on God for help when we’re in a crisis situation, or when we’re confused or afraid. We include God in life moments like baptisms and weddings and funerals. And that’s all very good! But there is so much more to having God as a living, active part of one’s life and that’s where it gets scary. It gets scary because to take our relationship, our partnership with God, to a deeper level we have to let go of that need to control how we let God into our lives. We have to let go and let God. Easy to say, so difficult to do. And scary. But when we can find that courage to follow God through the waters, to

encounter God in all those fiery problems in life that threaten to consume us – that’s when we can know God in a whole new way, a transforming way, a restoring way.

The truth is, we need God in our lives. We know that, obviously, or we wouldn’t be here this morning. But how can we push the envelope on what this means for us? How can we find the courage to confront those raging rivers we have to cross, those flames of fear and confusion that threaten to confound us? How is God a part of our negotiating those most difficult, those most frightening moments of our lives? These are exactly the questions Isaiah is responding to in this text and, lucky for us, he has some answers. How can we do this? How can we be who God wants us, needs us to be at this moment in history, at this point in our lives? Because God knows we can. That’s Isaiah’s answer. “For I am the Lord your God, the Holy one of Israel, your Savior ... [and] because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” You are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you. Precious! We are precious to God! Imagine that! We can be who God needs us to be, wants us to be, created us to be for the simple reason that God believes we can do it – to God we are precious, we are honored, we are loved. What more do we need to know.

We need to hold on to this knowledge of just how precious we are to God as this election season, as all the frightening situations in the world, confront us at almost every turn. Whether

it's the cranky person cutting ahead of us in the grocery store checkout line or the latest nasty news story, we are faced every day with more ugliness than we are used to seeing in our beloved country. Self-restraint has gone out of fashion for some on both sides of the political divide as insults are tossed back and forth like barbed volleyballs over a barbed-wire net. The nastiness of this election season has left us all bruised and battered, looking at people we thought we knew suspiciously just because of a bumper sticker on their car or a sign on their lawns. So many of us are looking around and saying, what has happened to us? What has happened to all those beliefs we cherish as Americans – freedom to believe what you want, live as you want and vote for whom you choose without fear?

All of those are valid questions these days. And they will need to be answered in the months ahead when November 8th has come and gone and the next page of the history of our country and the world begins to be written. We will be part of that history and how we respond in the aftermath of the election will say a lot about how God is really a part of our lives, or not. We will need our faith and our God more than ever, no matter how the election turns out because it is clear that no matter who wins, someone will be angry and hurt and possibly worse. We will need God's grace to negotiate these last weeks of the election season and then the election itself. We will need God's love to do what will be

required come November 9th and for a long time afterward because what will be needed in large measure is forgiveness. We'll need to forgive all the hurts, big and small, which this election has brought into sharp focus. We will need to forgive each other and ourselves for getting so wrapped up in all the extreme rhetoric on both sides of the political divide. We will need to forgive our leaders who let us down in so many ways. We will need to forgive to move forward.

In other words, dear friends, as this election draws to a close we know we are going have to walk through those flames Isaiah is talking about. The last debate and its aftermath have already singed our minds and our hearts. Those flames are out there and threatening to consume us, but we won't let them. God won't let them. Because we are precious to God. We are honored by God. We are loved by God. Dear friends, we are gifted by God with crispy faith – faith singed by the flames of these turbulent times in which we live, but faith just the same. And it is this crispy faith, this faith tempered by the flames of difficult, unexpected and frightening situations that will carry us through. This crispy faith is ours already. We know that. We celebrate that every time we come together here to worship or gather in prayer though scattered in time and place. We have crispy faith and it will see us through whatever comes our way. This is God's promise to us always. Do you believe it? That choice is yours alone. Amen.