

EXODUS 3:1-7, 10-12

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 Horeb, the mountain of God. 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. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' 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.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' 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.

Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

ROMANS 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Word of the Lord...

I went to Montreat, North Carolina for two weeks not quite sure what to expect. Montreat is a pcusa conference center built into the mountains that hosts a variety of conferences through the year. Six weeks during the year there is a conference for high school students. The conference is broken down into 3 two week sessions throughout the summer and each two weeks has its own planning team, set of keynote speakers, preacher to lead worship, and a group of volunteer Small Group Leaders who meet with a randomly selected group of youth

throughout the week in order to help them process what they are hearing and take it home with them. At the conference I was involved in there were 1100 youth during the first week and 600 during the second, so my groups were made up of 34 and 25 youth respectively.

It had been thirteen years since I had last been at a Youth Conference to serve as a small group leader. I made the commitment to go about a year and a half ago when I found out my friend and colleague, Kelly Wiant-Thralls AP of Market Square Presbyterian Church, was going to be the keynote speaker. I figured she could use the support of a friend there, I wanted to reconnect with the pcusa conference crowd and when the parent volunteers then the kid's highly touted clubs are free. I'll let Will tell you about the great time he had for two weeks during his sermon 14 years from now.

Montreat is a place to get away. The Scots would describe it as a 'thin place' where for many it feels like there is very little between them and God. And so it was quite a rude awakening to have the week kick off with a fire alarm and Kelly tell the story of how her grandmother was in the MGM Grand fire in Las Vegas many years ago and how it took them days before they knew that she had survived and how her grandmother in a panic left all of her important items behind and crawled on her hands and knees down sixteen floors of smoky stairwells clinging onto a cup filled with quarters... that she didn't even realize she had until she reached the hospital and they pried her hand off of it.

I had wondered what the theme 'World on Fire' pertained to and found out quicker than I expected that it was about a world that is in pain, a world that is in need, a world that in California's case is quite literally on fire.

Our Old Testament text this morning revolves around Moses and his Call from God. The world that Moses knew was also on fire – and not just the bush. Remember the story? Pharaoh had ordered all newborn boys to be killed and so Moses was sent downstream and ironically ended up in Pharaoh's household. But there were grave injustices being done against an enslaved people, the Israelites, and when Moses witnesses one he cannot stand it anymore and becomes a murderer. He is on the run and safe having found a nice quiet place to work and live out the rest of his days... but God wants more.

We spent the first day talking about Moses, about the challenges of the world he was living in and how he reacted when God told him it was up to him to change the world. And then we asked, "What are the challenges in our world? How do we react? What can we do to make a difference?"

I have been known to go days without turning on the news because I just can't take it. Or worse, I turn a cold heart to the injustices that are going on – the fires are too big Lord, there is nothing I can do about them.

Montreat is a place that many go to hide from the real world, but some of us don't have to drive to a mountain to hide our heads in the sand. It's okay to take a break every once in awhile but make no mistake about it, this world needs people of faith to care. If those of us with a deeper understanding and a higher calling don't engage in making this world a better place, who will? It is our task to equip one another with the confidence in who and *whose* we are so that no matter how intense the fires of this world become, we can be sent back out again.

My friend Kelly is a runner. And when she decided to start running longer distances she found a running partner who is a veteran of marathons to help her train. He told her that one of things he does while he runs is scan the ground for coins. He has been doing this for years and at one time had a ten pound bag of coins that he gave to charity and now they are together working on a bag that is five pounds.

Kelly calls them pennies from heaven because she has this theory that God likes the spectacle of watching her dive for a coin on the ground and yell out, "Penny!" and so at night the angels sprinkle them all around. How else to explain that on a run one day they will pick up 26 cents and just two days later on the same road they will find 51 more cents.

How many of us see a coin on the ground and don't bother picking it up? How many of us have a 5 or 10 cent minimum before we'll stoop down and pick up a coin?

It makes sense, right?

We have better things to do.

They aren't worth much.

Someone else will do it.

The thing is, even a penny that has been run over and beat up and is barely recognizable as its former self – has value. That penny can be reclaimed and redeemed.

Everything matters. Everything has value.

Everyone matters.

Everyone has value.

Anyone can be reclaimed and redeemed.

Anyone.

Anyone... for whatever reason it was Wednesday's theme that really stuck with me and with this summer's worship services celebrating the mission trips we have been on, and Stephen's beautiful charge and benediction last Sunday and this week's VBS festivities it has all made sense. I shared a few of my thoughts on it with the folks who were gathered for Monday's Committee Night and I reflect on it in next month's newsletter. It's the idea of taking our place in the Cloud of Witnesses.

Kathryn Z. Johnston
August 16, 2009

World on Fire

Romans 8:31-39
Exodus 3:1-7, 10-12

Now when I think Cloud of Witnesses, I think of All Saint's Day and those who have gone before us. I think of Ruth Ann Hatton, a woman who loved every child who ever walked into her Sunday nursery and never missed a Sunday except for the weekends she participated in the Special Olympics. I think of Charlie Caparn who became our church's unofficial photographer documenting every event and program making sure that eighties hair and seventies outfits would never be forgotten. Your church photographer for a long time was Jay.

But Kelly and her co-keynoter, Francis, pushed us to recognize our own place in the cloud of witnesses. Just as we have folks who we look up to, who have helped us in our faith, there are also folks who in turn look up to us. This past week we had adult and youth helpers. Who do you think were looked up to by adoring elementary and nursery school fans, the parents? No. It was the youth. I heard one little girl giggle after a game on Friday afternoon, "I splashed Joe with a sponge!" And her friend said, "I know... you are SO lucky."

Youth, notice how the younger kids look up to you – literally and figuratively. They will NEVER forget the time that big kid dressed like Paul and was chained to Silas all week. They see you talk about the youth mission trip and they lean to their parents and say they want to be in the youth group someday too. You help them in Sunday School and then when they see you at another time you wonder why they don't look up and say hello... it's because they are in awe of you. You are a rock star to them.

You're important to me too. Much has been written and said lately about the state of the church and the condition of our faith values and there is a touch of truth to some of it. But we all know that bad news sells and I think the media are selling the minority and ignoring the reality. The youth and young adults are not the future of the church – you are the now of the church.

No matter where we are and in what stage of life, we are the NOW of the church.

Sometimes it seems easier to walk away. The church is changing too fast or is not changing fast enough. The music is too loud and fast or too slow. The services are not at the right time and there are so many other options available. The leadership isn't doing it the way you think it should be done. There are plenty of excuses and negativity to push us out the door but...

Do not leave.
Do NOT leave.

Stay... because anyone and anything can be reclaimed.
Stay... because anyone and anything can be redeemed.

Stay... because I don't want to be the church without you.

In the name of the Father, the son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Kathryn Z. Johnston
August 16, 2009

World on Fire

Romans 8:31-39
Exodus 3:1-7, 10-12