

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 19, 2023

His Love Is Fire Exodus 24:12-18

This past Tuesday, Valentine's Day, a 2022 Oscar-nominated documentary returned to theaters for one night only. The film is titled *Fire of Love*. It follows the daring research and romance of Maurice and Katia Krafft, French scientists who devoted their lives to studying volcanoes. The Kraffts hiked to the edges of active volcanoes, collected data samples, and captured dramatic, breathtaking footage that helped educate the public about the wonders and dangers of volcanic explosions. Their mission was essentially to help people fall in love with volcanoes. Sadly, the two of them died in the 1991 Mount Unzen eruption in Japan. Their bodies were found side by side. The director of *Fire of Love* commented on how appropriate it was for the film to come out on Valentine's Day, when we celebrate love and the people we walk through life with.

We often associate the language of love and the imagery of fire. And if fire on the mountain is something that stirs your interest, today's text from Exodus may catch your eye. It certainly caught the eyes of the Israelites who remained at the base of the mountain while Moses was at the top, meeting with God and experiencing his glory. According to our text, "To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain" (v. 17).

In the Bible, fire imagery is often used to describe God's presence or his revealing of himself to individuals and groups. For instance, earlier in Exodus, God makes himself known to Moses "in flames of fire from within a bush" (3:2). Further along in Exodus, God descends upon Mount Sinai "in fire" (19:18). The prophet Ezekiel, trying to describe the indescribable, says, "I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him" (1:27).

Blaise Pascal was one of the leading physicists and mathematicians of his age. In addition to his work on probability theory and his research into the problem of the vacuum, Pascal was a practical inventor. He developed a calculating device, made a syringe, and created a hydraulic press. He was also a religious philosopher who reflected carefully on the importance of inner religion, the experience of God through the heart. Many maintain that the central moment of his life was a vision, a mystical experience, he had on the night of November 23, 1654. After the vision, which lasted for two hours, Pascal wasted no time writing down some words about the experience:

The year of grace, 1654
Monday, 23 November, Feast of St. Clement, Pope and Martyr
...
From about half past ten in the evening until half past twelve
FIRE
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the
Philosophers and savants
Certitude, Certitude. Feeling, Joy. Peace.

God of Jesus Christ.
 My God and Thy God
 ...
 Forgetfulness of the world and of everything except God.¹

Pascal's recollection of the vision went on for several more lines. After putting these words down on parchment, he sewed them into the inside lining of his favorite jacket, as a reminder of his encounter with God.

The association of God with fire often has to do with the holiness of God and his command that his people be holy. Just as fire purifies and destroys, so God purifies the righteous and destroys the wicked. His presence aims to rid us of the sinfulness and unrighteousness that separate us from him and from one another. In order to be brought into communion with God and with one another, in the way he intends us to be, we need the pyrotechnic presence of God in our lives.

In his book, *Yawning at Tigers* Drew Dyck tells about a moment during a trip he and a group of American journalists made to the Holy Land. Dyck says,

Our Jewish guide, Amir, had been leading trips through the Holy Land for thirty years and had a profound grasp of Scripture. At each site we visited, Amir would seek out a spot as isolated as possible from the never-ending stream of tourists, gather us in a semicircle, and expound upon the historical and theological significance of the site. Sometimes he seemed more like a preacher than a tour guide. I remember one talk in particular. With the Mount of Olives shimmering in the background, Amir described what he saw as the basic problem of the universe.

"God longs to come down to earth to redeem the righteous and judge the wicked," he said. "But there's a problem."

He leaned toward us and stretched out his arms like a scarecrow.

"His presence is like radiation, more dangerous than plutonium. Nothing can live when God comes near. If God came to earth, both the righteous and the unrighteous would perish. It would be like a thousand nuclear bombs exploding at once. We would all die!"²

Though Dyck acknowledges that the comparison was strange, maybe even sacrilegious, he did wonder if the tour guide was onto something. Dyck recalled stories from God's relationship with his people Israel where God's holiness was dangerous, and even deadly.

And yet there goes Moses, up the mountain, into the cloud, exposing himself to the fiery presence of God. It's no minor or routine matter to expose yourself to God's glory. But then again, we ourselves have gotten used to it. In one sense, we do it every Sunday when we gather for congregational worship. Author Eugene Peterson says, "Worship is a trailhead that leads us into the heightened attentiveness and adoration that is the worship of God."³ This is the day of the week when we come together to ascend the mountain, to enter the cloud, to step into the fiery presence of God, whose holiness is not to be taken lightly or casually.

True, we want our congregational worship to be characterized by a sense of being at home, with God's family, in God's presence. We want to cultivate a sense of warmth and intimacy, a spirit of closeness with God and with one another, but not at the expense of a sense of God's mystery and majesty. Entering the presence of God calls for attitudes and actions of humility and respectfulness toward the Lord. As the writer of Hebrews captures it, "Since

we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (12:29).

The story is told about a young stranger to the Alps who was making his first climb. He was accompanied by two stalwart guides. Though the ascent was steep and hazardous, the young man felt secure with one guide ahead of him and one following. They climbed for hours. At last, breathless, they reached for some rocks protruding from the snow above them—the summit. Because one of the guides wanted to let the stranger have the first glorious view of heaven and earth, he moved aside to let him go first. Forgetting the gales that would blow across the rocks of the summit, the young man leaped to his feet. But the chief guide grabbed him and dragged him down. "On your knees, sir!" he shouted. "You are never safe here except on your knees."⁴

During his meeting with God on the mountain, I'm guessing that Moses didn't spend the entirety of those 40 days on his knees. But I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't at least start out that way, kneeling his way into the presence of the Lord. After all, the God whom Moses encountered, and whom we encounter, isn't primarily the man upstairs, the head honcho, your buddy, or your co-pilot. He is the Lord God Almighty, the Holy One of Israel, the King of glory, the Maker of heaven and earth, Savior and Judge. As one of our hymns says, "Bow down before Him, Love and adore Him."⁵

That's because the presence of holiness doesn't mean the absence of love. On the contrary, God's love for us and for the world is a holy love. A love committed to overcoming sin, evil, and death. A love devoted to purifying you and me of our unrighteousness. True love requires a God who is a consuming, devouring fire, who reconciles us to himself and brings us into communion with himself by ridding us of all that is unholy.

In the scene right before today's text in Exodus, this holy and powerful God does something remarkable by revealing himself in the context of a covenant meal which he shares with the leaders of the people of Israel. In doing so, God doesn't set aside any of his glory. He's still just as awesome and indescribable. But he reveals his power in a way that reassures the people that he is with them and for them. He will dwell with them. His holiness is driven and shaped by love for them.

Oswald Chambers wrote, "The Bible reveals not first the love of God but the intense, blazing holiness of God." Then he went on to speak of "his love at the center of that holiness."⁶ This holiness with love at its center has been revealed to us most of all in Jesus Christ. Recall that in our other Scripture reading for today, from Matthew, we were taken up another mountain where the glory of God was unveiled in the Son. Through sight and sound, God's power and majesty were on display. Peter, James, and John "fell to the ground, terrified" (17:6). The Lord's holiness was too much for them. They knew that they were only safe if on their knees. But Jesus touched them, lifted them back up, told them not to be afraid, and eventually brought them back down the mountain, to continue a journey that would eventually lead to the cross. And that's where the glory of God would be most fully unveiled. In Jesus' suffering and death, the God whose holiness has love at the center of it descended to redeem us, to purify us with fiery forgiveness, so that we can be his holy people. As poet Thomas Traherne captured it, "The cross is a tree set afire with invisible flame, that illumineth all the world. The flame is love."⁷

In an interview, Maggie Gobran, a missionary who works in the slums of Cairo, Egypt, especially with destitute children, was asked about whether she had ever experienced a time of bleakness and abandonment. "Mama Maggie," as she is often known, answered, "This is the fire that Jesus wants everyone to go through. In the fire you are either burned

or become pure. His love is fire. It consumes or purifies.” She added, “The fire of love will burn our sins and it will take us to dimensions we never thought of...”⁸ His love is fire. So here in his holy presence today, may the fiery love of the Lord come upon you and me, so that we’ll be purified and made more into what he has redeemed us to be, in the likeness of the Son.

¹ Kevin Miller, Christianity Today International; from J. M. Cohen, introduction to *Pensées* (New York: Penguin, 1961) n.p.

² Drew Nathan Dyck, *Yawning at Tigers: You Can’t Tame God, So Stop Trying* (Nashville: Nelson, 2014) 6-7.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *On Living Well: Brief Reflections on Wisdom for Walking in the Way of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2021) Kindle edition.

⁴ *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 281.

⁵ Audrey Mieir, “His Name Is Wonderful.”

⁶ Quoted in Dyck, *Yawning at Tigers*, 3-4.

⁷ Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, No. 4.

⁸ “The Fire Within Mama Maggie.” Interview by Marshall Shelly. Christianity Today. October 17, 2011. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2011/fall/mamamaggie.html> (February 16, 2023).