

### **Exodus 3:1-4**

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 Mount 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."

### **Exodus 13:21**

And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.

### **Acts 2:1-4**

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

### **Blessed or burned?**

Each Sunday, the altar candles are lighted, calling us to center ourselves as we begin worship.

Even in a lighted room, flames draw our eyes with their flickering light. Our response to the light may be instinctual, learned or mimicking the actions of others, but it is universal. We are so familiar with the process, we rarely think about the candles, the act of lighting them, and their meaning.

When the candles are lighted – by the way, I figured the device used to light them has a fancier, more elegant name, but it does not – we are symbolically bringing Jesus – the light of the world - into our midst to worship with us. Of course, we know Jesus is always with us and especially whenever two or more are gathered in His name, but the walk down the aisle with the lighted wick reminds us why we are here and that we do not worship alone.

The altar holds two candles, which together remind us that Jesus was both human and divine. Both remain lighted throughout the service and, at the end, the light is gathered back onto the

wick before the candles are extinguished so the light can be sent back into the world, reminding us to carry that light as we leave this place.

There are other times during the Christian year when we make use of the candle's flame; these are more notable to us because they are less frequent.

The beginning of the liturgical year is Advent, which begins four weeks before Christmas. During Advent, we light candles in an Advent wreath to celebrate attributes that are central to our identity as Christians – hope, peace, joy and love.

On Christmas Eve, we light the center candle – the Christ candle – to symbolize Jesus' entry into the world. Light ushers in the newborn babe and the beginning of the Church year.

At that service, we also light individual candles, passing the flame from one to the next until each one in the room has his or her own light to shine. These recognize the birth of Jesus and the light His birth brought to the world. We hold them low to demonstrate how keeping Jesus as a low priority lessens the light, then we hold them high to demonstrate the brilliance of His presence and love. When we hold the light high – when we allow Jesus the place of honor in our lives – the world becomes brighter.

During the Easter season, we light the Paschal candle, in addition to the altar candles. The Paschal candle is a large candle that symbolizes the risen Christ. It is often decorated with a cross, symbols of the resurrection, and the Alpha and Omega, to remind us God is the beginning and the end. We use this candle also at baptisms – the beginning of a person's journey with God – and at funerals – the end of a person's life on earth.

Some churches have racks of candles worshippers may light as a physical act of prayer.

The light, it seems, surrounds us literally in the form of candles, as well as figuratively through our belief that Jesus is our light.

The use of a flame is an important part of the symbol of the United Methodist church. It came into being in 1968, with the union of two denominations – the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The flame reminds us of Jesus with us and also recalls the moment John Wesley sensed God's presence in his life and felt his heart to be 'strangely warmed.'

The flame is an apt biblical symbol recalling God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush, God's guiding of the Israelites in the wilderness with a pillar of fire, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit among the disciples at Pentecost.

The flame is also an apt symbol in our physical world. Fire warms us, lights our way and allows us to transform objects from one thing to another – we'd all be eating raw batter without heat to turn it into cake.

But like just about anything, fire isn't always beneficial. Perhaps some of you have experienced a house fire or been burned by a hot stove. Remember Icarus? Getting too close to the fire – or, rather, approaching it with hubris and without understanding – is always a bad idea. One must be aware of and respect its power.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not telling you it is possible to get too close to God. It really isn't. But it is absolutely possible to misuse the perceived power of religion or spirituality to cause harm.

Religion is powerful. Through the years the Church has been used to cudgel people into subservience, to justify invading or subjugating others, and to cover up emotional and physical abuse by the very people who claim to hold its blessings. Is it any wonder that while people long for more meaning in their spiritual lives, they are wary of its source? They have been burned by the very flame that was meant to warm them, light their way and give meaning to their lives.

I'm sure we can all recall incidents – whether personal or reports from others - of spiritual or emotional abuse perpetrated by church leaders who manipulated scripture, used guilt or fear to control behavior, or demanded unquestioning obedience. They accepted the mantle of God's authority and twisted it to their own purposes. Under the cover of doing God's work, they followed self-serving ways.

While perhaps most reported upon in the Catholic church, no denomination is without those who would hide their worst selves as emotional, physical or spiritual abusers behind the screen of the Church. The trauma to the concept of a loving God who wants only the best for His people is immeasurable certainly to those who experience the abuse, but also to those who hear of it. When the Church as a body rejects victims' claims, moves abusers to new hunting grounds or refuses to acknowledge the depth of harm, it fails the victims, itself as an institution and, most assuredly, God.

Until 1956, women were not allowed to be ordained in our church, even though John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, licensed a woman to preach in 1761. From 1972 to 2024, the United Methodist Book of Discipline included language stating that homosexuality was 'incompatible with Christian teaching.' We barred LGBTQ people from ordination and from being married in the church. We now live more fully into our motto "Open hearts, open doors, open minds," but imagine the damage we and other churches inflicted – and which many churches still inflict – by

labeling many children of God as not good enough to be a member in good standing in God's Kingdom based on factors such as gender, marital status, race, or sexual orientation.

Some churches focus so narrowly and intently on preserving marriages despite domestic violence, or vilifying substance abusers, or condemning girls and women carrying the children of rape that they fail to see the humanity – the humans – the children of God – who are suffering from the actions of others. "It is God's will," they are told. Or, "if your faith is strong enough, you can get through this." Or, worst of all, "God is testing you."

On a different scale, but equally as harmful are the norms some churches see as acceptable. Failing to greet and welcome visitors, gossiping, being jealous of others in the church or of other churches, or forming cliques all reflect badly not just on those participating in such actions, but on the church as a whole.

Now, I have clergy colleagues who could not preach this sermon. Their congregations would be cringing at their church's doctrines – as I have in the past at some of our denomination's – and would be pointing fingers at others and/or wondering if the last part of the sermon was directed at them.

I can preach this sermon because I know this church. I know it to be infinitely compassionate, inclusive and welcoming. And I suspect you are United Methodists because the God you worship is a loving God and you strive to be loving as well.

So, what's the point?

I felt called to write a sermon about how we can use flames to bless or to burn, and I heeded that call. From it, I leave you with these three things:

First, be aware when you speak to those who do not attend church that they may have a darned good reason for not doing so. Something has happened to them, or to someone they care about that was not addressed by the church, or was, perhaps, even caused by the church. You may see the church as a place of light and hope and love, where they see it as a place of judgement, exclusion and dogma over compassion.

You have the power to use your flame of faith to empathize with them and help them understand that not all churches, not all church people, not all clergy are the same. You can use your flame to promote healing and bring others to or back to God.

Second, you are allowed to – even required to – question those things about the church and the church's doctrine that are puzzling to you, or that you find just plain wrong. It is the questioning of ordinary people like you and me that – when loud enough – catches the attention of those in charge and makes them measure established rules against the love we are called to share. By no means am I saying that all behaviors should be tolerated. We can, however, help others find

their way to a life lived in accordance with God's rules through love and inclusion rather than through fear and exclusion.

Finally, as Christians we all carry fire. We can choose to hide it, which makes others think we are ashamed of it. We can choose to use it to judge and belittle others who do not look, think or believe as we do. Or we can choose to shine our light on everyone, spreading love as Jesus did.

The flame you nurture and carry into the world can be one that blesses by giving light, warming and transforming the world into a better place, or it can be one that burns anyone who comes near to you or to the church.

Carry your flame of faith with confident hope in the goodness of God's creatures and a love that burns bright for yourself and everyone you meet no matter what obstacles it encounters.