

## **When Big Butter Jesus Went Up in Flames**

A Sermon offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle, Pastor  
June 19-20, 2010 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7)  
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

### **1 Kings 19:1-15a**

*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.*

*But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." [Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."] He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.*

*Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."*

*He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus...."*

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and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire;  
and after the fire a sound of sheer silence."***

1 Kings 19:11-12

I am sure that most of you in this room heard the news that late last Monday night, Big Butter Jesus went up in flames and burned to the ground like a Styrofoam cup tossed in a camp fire. If this is the first time you are hearing this, I would like to know how you have remained so blissfully unaware?

I rose from the bed at 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday to begin my summer morning drill: fix breakfast for the kids, pack lunches for the day, and gather clothing and swimwear for the boys' summer camps. As I groggily wandered into the kitchen I was greeted by my wide awake partner, Dan, giving me the news: Big Butter Jesus had burned to the ground. I went to take my shower at 7:00 a.m. and just as I was about to step in, I received a phone call from Brian Terry telling me that Big Butter Jesus had burned to the ground.

He had just got the message from a friend of his who lives in Las Vegas. Thankfully, Dan was eager to talk about the fire. I was still too sleepy. So he and Brian carried on the conversation. I got in the shower. Before I left for church I grabbed my Blackberry and there was an email from Ruth Hopkins: Big Butter Jesus had burned to the ground. And at that was just the beginning of my day and the ongoing discussion.

As I read the news reports and listened to the multitude of responses to the fire, I found myself more intrigued NOT by the fire itself but by how people were making meaning of the fire. On the early morning news that Tuesday morning, there was a hysterical church member from Solid Rock Church saying that the fire couldn't have been a coincidence. She was seeing the fire as a literal act of God and suggested that something wasn't right in her Church. She called for her church to get on its knees and ask for forgiveness and called them to repentance for every sin in their lives so that God himself would come back to their church. I guess the destruction of Big Butter Jesus was a sign that God was angry and had left that church.

Another person said "Seriously, you build a giant statue of Jesus, then God strikes it with lightning and destroys it. Aren't you clearly doing something wrong?"

A young 22-year old guy saw it as a bad omen: "I think it's a sign of the end of the world. If lightning is going to strike God, then there's no hope."

Another person expressed confusion about the fire, wondering why God would strike down Jesus and not the Hustler store across Interstate 75.

Some passerby's said it was the Lord trying to tell us all that it was about him and not about images we can make of him.

Some were so disturbed by the fire that one church member's immediate "first thought" was that the fire was the work of an atheist. (You can only hope that a second or third thought moved her in a different direction.)

Some say money is wasted on building statues like that. They say that the money could have been used for better purposes, like feeding the hungry. And I guess there is some truth in that, but I also think there is a place for beauty in this world: art and architecture and music can cost a lot of money. And yet I can't help but think of the woman who came to Jesus and broke open an expensive jar of ointment that she poured on his head.

"But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; (Mark 14-3-8)

I don't think the question is should we have art and architecture and music that speaks to a spiritual reality, even if it is costly? I think we need more beauty in the world. In fact, we might need more of it these days, instead of depending so much on words printed on a page. Artists offer us another way of seeing and entering the experience of God.

Now, I think we can argue whether or not Big Butter Jesus was good art or not! Personally, I thought it was ugly and a distraction to the way of Jesus that I would want to emphasize for our day and time. But, then again, beauty is, as they say, in the eyes of the beholder.

So is meaning...

Some did see Big Butter Jesus as an inspiration, as an artistic masterpiece that will be greatly missed.

Others were glad to see a “tacky” thing like that go, and said so. Engineers thought it was a really bad idea to put flammable materials on top of lightning rod.

Some said if it was supposed to be here, it would still be here, implying, I guess, that God must have wanted it gone.

Some saw the statue as a bold statement for the Lord, leading them to praise God each time they drove by it. Others saw it as a the butt of a bad joke, or were, like comedian Heyward Banks, led to write a song called “Big Butter Jesus.”

So, with all of that said, and much of it said “in the name of the Lord,” AND after preaching with passion and zeal last weekend that it is us...WE are the ones who speak for God; well, now, I am really sorry I ever said it!

Not really! I am just saddened that so many people say dumb and unthoughtout and embarrassing things in God's name. I am miffed that so many people can say so many stupid things, that they may have learned in Sunday school, or from some preacher, or sitting on grandma's lap, but what they say is purely rote, and totally disconnected from their actual experience of God and devoid of any intentional, first hand observation about how God is at work in the world. Hearing all of the non-sense of last week around Bigger Butter Jesus burning to the ground, I am more convinced than ever that people like you and me must speak a word for God. We need to offer an alternative voice for God, hopefully a voice of reason and sanity and truth telling and love, not fear. If we don't offer our voices then all that's left for the world to hear as “God's voice” is all the crap we've been hearing since Big Butter Jesus went up in flames.

Surprisingly, and to their credit, the church's pastors, Lawrence and Darlene Bishop, who are not known to be giants of theological reflection around these parts, have been clear that they felt there was nothing spiritual behind their Jesus statue burning to the ground. It just seemed like pure science to them. “It was some metal underneath that was hit by lightning. If it was a statue of a horse or a cow it would have been the same thing,” said Lawrence Bishop. Darlene Bishop said that her first thought upon hearing about the fire was not a concern about the statue. She said she thought about the people who had recently experienced flooding in Nashville and Arkansas and the people who had lost jobs in the Gulf of Mexico due to the oil spill. They were the ones we should be concerned about. She said, that the statue is just something that's made out of fiberglass. Good for them!

Last week, I tried to focus on the question of “Who speaks for God?” But in wrestling with that text, I also noted that there were some other directions we could have gone with it. One of those directions was to think about God's role in making bad things happen, or putting into God's voice actions that are violent or punitive. Does God bring about punishment and destruction? Is God the source of mayhem and mischief; of madness and violence? I tried to say as clearly as I could, that I didn't think so. Yes, life can come at you fast. Yes, life is full of disappointment and heartache of all kinds. Yes, loss of any kind, whether of persons, health or possessions can be painful and devastating. Yes, there are consequences to our behavior, and sometimes we feel the sting of those consequences in our own life and sometimes it is future generations that feel the sting of our poor choices today. This is all part of our lives and our stories. There is no use denying it. There is no use trying to gloss over it. But is God the source of that pain and those awful situations? Does God do that to us to teach us something? Is it God's will to punish us or correct us with awful events and struggles? Was it God's power and will and purpose that burned Big Butter Jesus to the ground? Again, I want to say it clearly: I don't think so. God doesn't cause or will bad things in our lives and in the world, but this is our promise: God is with us through it all, calling us to stand firm in love and justice. And yet, when we are faced with horrific situations, we often find ourselves asking some deep down questions about the meaning of life...about the meaning of God...about God's role and purpose in our lives.

What I like about the sacred scriptures are the questions it keeps asking us. In many ways, the questions the Bible asks are more important than the answers it may give. We read the Bible and find that the Bible reads us, too. Questions which have a particular meaning in the old stories of Israel transcend their contexts and interrogate us as well. “Where are you?” (Gen. 3) God asks the prototypical humans, Adam

and Eve, but we know that question is really for us and that God is seeking you and me. “Who am I that you should send me?” (Exodus 3:11) Moses wonders, but when we hear that question we examine our calling as well. “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 6:30) begs the Philippian jailer, but we search for that answer, too. And so on...

These are not the kind of questions you can answer off the top of your head while they play the Jeopardy theme song in the background just before Alex Trebec asks you to respond. They are the kind of questions you carry around inside of you as you go. They are defining questions which send you on a journey and shape your life with God. We find these loaded questions all over the place in the Bible. And what could be more loaded than the question God asks Elijah today: “What are you doing here?”

I can imagine Elijah rolling his eyes and biting his tongue before answering what seems like a stunningly stupid question coming from God. After all, God knows just days before that Elijah had single-handedly faced down the Baal prophets in a spectacular contest at Mt. Carmel. He was at his prophetic best that day. Alone, he faced King Ahab and offered him the contest between the gods of Baal or the God of Israel, Yahweh. Elijah says, “You gather your 450 prophets of Baal and throw in the 400 priestesses of your Queen Jezebel’s favorite goddess, Asherah. We’ll build two altars, and the God who sends fire from heaven will be the true God.” Alone, Elijah challenged the wishy washy Israelites with his own loaded question: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow Yahweh; but if Baal, then follow Baal.” Alone, he made fun of the Baal boys as they ranted and raved in front of the altar: “Where is your God? Elijah” asked. Pray louder! He taunted them with words like: Maybe he’s on vacation; Maybe he’s taking a rest room break; maybe he is grabbing a nap; maybe he can’t hear you!” I didn’t make this up. It is all in the text. Then Elijah calls for his altar to be soaked with water, not once, but three times. Now there’s faith! Can your God burn wet wood? Alone, before King and country and the enemy ready to tear out his heart and blame him for every problem the people face, Elijah turns to his God and prays: “Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Yahweh, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” And lo and behold, the fire from God strikes the altar and leaves nothing but burnt dirt.

Whew! Perhaps it is stories like these that cause so many people to see God in fires. And while a story like this may make for good reading, and may even make an important point that highlights the power of the living God against the backdrop of so many false gods, to take this story literally makes it incredulous to our own experience of God.

For Elijah and God, this is a great victory. I just wish we could have ended the story right there. But sadly, in the fervor of the moment, Elijah went too far. He had the people seize the prophets of Baal and Asherah and had each one of them killed.

It is the hardest thing in the world to do when you are in a fight, to NOT let your opponents turn you to their methods so that in essence you become one of them anyway; become hateful in order to defeat the hateful; become rigid and opinionated in order to defeat the rigid and opinionated; become politically unscrupulous in order to defeat the politically unscrupulous; become violent in order to defeat violence. When we do that, everybody loses. We know that violence begets violence. And that’s what happens. After Elijah had the prophets of Baal and Asherah killed, Jezebel – that personification of wickedness and evil, that biblical femme fatale – vows to kill Elijah in return. And Elijah, who has been facing troubles right and left, and thus far, has been the epitome of strength and confidence, cracks at Jezebel’s threat, and literally runs for his life.

That is where we pick up with the lectionary reading today. Today, we find Elijah in bad shape and in a bad place. He is worn down, exhausted, lonely, depressed and afraid. And this is often the very place we end up when life comes at us fast; when the things we hold dear go up in flames. It is often the place where we begin to question God’s actions (or lack of action) and God stops making sense to us.

Elijah comes to a broom tree to rest and then to a cave at the edge of Mount Horeb, and there he lies down and goes to sleep. It is there that God asks: Elijah, what are you doing here? And there it is again.

This is where the question transcends the ancient biblical context to address us about our own calling and destiny. When life comes at you hard, and you find yourself at a low point, hopeless, tired, lonely, depressed and fearful, it is there that we hear God ask: "What are you doing here?"

Then Elijah hears a Voice telling him to go stand on the mountain, for the Lord is about to pass by. Suddenly there is an earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake. Then there is a wind, but God is not in the wind. And then there is fire, but God is not in the fire. After the fire, there is only silence – "sheer silence" the text says, which must mean a lot of silence, a big silence.

Earlier translations call it a "still small voice," which many of us are more familiar with. However, that translation has come under scholarly dispute. I am not sure that "a sound of sheer silence" is any more helpful, but scholars say that the text literally means "The sound of crushed silence," implying the idea of an audible hush, or a pregnant silence. It is the vacuum that follows the big noise, an almost audible silence. But I am thinking that Paul Simon might just have said it best, when he sang it as "The Sound of Silence." It is the space where, finally, we get quiet and let God do the talking for a change.

Sometimes we may think that God is the force behind all of the dramatic events of our lives: the earthquakes, the winds, the fires, but Elijah's story gives us an unexpected twist, suggesting that God is not in those events after all, but is found in the silence instead. Perhaps this idea that God is found in the silence is even an alternative story, a corrective if you will, to the story of a God who uses supernatural, super hero power, who can send down fire and burn up water soaked wood to prove that God is God.

I would be less than honest with you if I did not tell you that the Bible is full of conflicting and competing theologies. So much of what we've been told and what we hear declares that the Bible is without error, and that it is somehow perfect, implying of course that there is one seamless, clear perspective because God is its author. To say anything less than that would weaken and undermine the authority of the scriptures.

But it seems to me nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible is full of competing ideas and theologies and contradictions because at the end of the day, human beings wrote it, not God. And I don't see that as a weakness at all, but rather one of the Bible's greatest strengths. Thus, it behooves each one of us to wrestle with those competing visions, to bring our stories and experiences to those texts, to discern for ourselves which ones make the most sense; to determine for ourselves which ones will be formative for us; to decide for ourselves which ones will give shape to our life with God in the world.

Now let me say something about God's power: I think God is powerful. We pray every week at Cross Creek: "In the presence and POWER of God, we share your prayer." But I don't see God's power as a unilateral, kick-butt, supernatural, send-down-fire-from-heaven kind of power. That kind of power might make for good movies and stories, but it is not helpful in our pursuit of understanding God's power and we experience it. In addition, God's power is not manipulative and coercive or forceful.

When I speak of God's power, I am speaking of relational power. I am speaking of the power of love the power of persuasion; the power of influence. Because Dan and I share a loving relationship together, he has power in my life. I have power in his life. Words and perspectives and actions matter because we are in relationship. Because we share in the loving relationship of being church together we have power with each other. What we say and what we think and what we do matters because of it. If a stranger came up to you or me, they really have no power because there is no relationship established. There is no power with the desire and the covenant commitment to be relationship together. So it is with God. God only has power in our lives because we have decided that being in relationship with God is important and healthy and transformative. And this relationship will only have power when it is grounded in love, not fear. And because our relationship with God is grounded in love, the only power that is offered is a persuasive, influential, luring power. Love does not coerce, or manipulate, or destroy. That is an abuse of power. And sadly, way too many Christians seem to enter into relationship with an abusive god, a relationship born of fear, not love. When I talk of God's power, I am talking about a power that is rooted and grounded in Love. Thus, God's power in our lives is born out loving intimacy.

And that is why silence is so important. It is our intimate time with God. Unfortunately, we don't spend enough time in silence, either in our worship, or in our personal lives. Our lives are constantly filled with noise and distractions that rob us of any useful or powerful quiet time. Henri Nouwen said silence means listening for God. The Psalmist said 'For God alone my soul rests in silence.' (Psalm 62) The Quakers cautioned that we should speak only when we can improve upon the silence.

What can we learn from the silence? What are the benefits of silence? I guess that after we shut up, after we still the distractions and the endless noise, we have an opportunity to do nothing and instead, let God do something for us. What I am talking about is the meaningful spiritual practice of centering ourselves in God. What I am talking about is the long trusted practice of meditation. Howard Thurman, an important and thoughtful African American writer called it "The Centering Moment." These practices are valued across the world religions and various cultures.

Since silence is an end in itself, we don't sit in silence in order to get something from God. We don't ask "What am I getting out of this?" To ask that question means that we have not yet entered into silence because our ego is still chattering on. When we sit in silence, we detach from our ego. One has called it "dispossession." We detach from ego to allow something to happen to us. We are floating on the silence, to let it affect us and move us. There is an energy in the silence, and that energy is the Spirit, the divine energy, moving us to deeper, loving communion with God. Silence is a time for us to do nothing. It's a time to put ourselves at God's disposal – to be still and rest in God's loving embrace and abide in God's strong presence that is always with us and for us.

Now, I know many of you are uncomfortable with silence. A few years ago, during Advent, I tried to incorporate a little Quaker silence in our worship. I set aside 10 minutes for silence in each service. Well, you would have thought that I was asking everyone to give \$100,000 each to the church budget. You would have thought that I was asking the impossible. It was obvious to me then, that for the most part, we don't like silence. We are a word-oriented people. We fill the air with talk, TV, radio, emails, texts, phones and music. So much so, that when the silence comes, we feel awkward, even afraid. In the silence, it may seem like nothing is happening. In the silence, it may feel like dead air. But our scripture text today is pushing us in an opposite direction, telling us to draw near to silence, telling us that silence is the very place where God is fully known and felt. Silence is the place where we can just be, not do; where we can give up ego and rest. In silence we immerse ourselves in our God. Meister Eckhart called it "sinking into God." In short, silence is wordless prayer.

In the silence we let the distractions float on through. We let the inner chatter settle. We rest in God. We commune with God. We sink into God: source of life and love. And we know again, that indeed, God is with us and for us. And when life comes at us hard, It is best NOT to attribute such things to an act of God but instead to move into the silence; to center ourselves in God until God raises us up...as Cinda sang earlier.

When Big Butter Jesus went up in flames, people were surprised, including me, that there wasn't much there; there wasn't much there holding that huge statue together. Today, All I am really trying to is call our attention to the importance of how we make sense of God's power and how God might use that power in the world and in our lives, and how we might draw strength and hope from God's power? And when the hard times come our way, when our own Big Butter Jesus goes up in flames, where will you find God? Or more importantly, where will God find you? And when you encounter others who experience firsthand the pain and grief of life, what kind of word of God will you voice and offer? I am hoping that we here at Cross Creek will be a little more intentional in seeking to build a theological framework for our live and for our witness to God in the world that has a little more substance and a deeper meaning. So that when the trials do come, and they will come, you won't find your faith burned to the ground; you won't find like Big Butter Jesus, that there wasn't much there.

And for God's sake, after all the chatter of last week, and after all the attempts to speak a word of the Lord, if you've heard nothing else I've said today, hear this: "The power of silence is greatly underestimated. When you have nothing to say, please, PLEASE say nothing." (Cathie Freeman – First Aboriginal Australian to win an Olympic medal) Amen.