

## **Our God is indeed ...**

Hebrews 12:18-29

August 25, 2013

Our God is indeed ...

How would you complete the sentence? Here's how the author of the letter to the Hebrews completed the sentence ...

(Read scripture lesson)

Our God is indeed a destroying fire.

That's not the way I would have completed the sentence. It's troubling. It's disturbing. When I read that text this week -- the New Testament text designated by the revised common lectionary for this Sunday -- I had two choices. I could ignore it and look for another more comfortable and more comforting text to preach from, or I could struggle with it, facing head-on the difficulties of hearing it and preaching it. I made my choice. So now we have to struggle with it together!

Our God is indeed a destroying fire.

This week, in Duncan, Oklahoma, three boys, aged fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen murdered Christopher Lane, a twenty-two-year-old Australian in town visiting his girlfriend. You probably heard the story: they were bored, they wanted to have some fun, so they decided to kill somebody. Chris jogged past their house, so they chose him. It was also reported that at least one of the boys was dancing and laughing when he was arrested.

What can we say? It is appalling. It is senseless. It is horrifying. Christopher's father said: "The killing was heartless, and to try to understand it is a short way to insanity."

What do we expect God to say?

In the last two weeks, close to one thousand supporters of ousted president Mohamed Morsi, most of them unarmed protesters, have been killed by government troops. During this same period, Morsi supporters ambushed two vans carrying thirty Egyptian policemen. They made them get out of the vans, lie on the ground, and then, they shot them. And Christians and Christian churches throughout Egypt are being explicitly targeted by the Muslim Brotherhood, burning and looting and killing.

What can we say? Who is right? Who is wrong? Who is not wrong? What side do we take? What do we do? What can anybody do? Everybody is suffering, everybody is scared, everybody is angry.

What do we expect God to say?

Some 870 million people on our planet, one of every eight people, do not have enough to eat. Worldwide, more than half of all deaths not related to aging, are directly attributable to hunger. And, meanwhile, we get on with our lives, watching "America's Got Talent" or drafting our fantasy football teams, or shopping for a new "T" shirt.

What do we expect God to say?

God is raging! Abraham Heschel, a Jewish biblical scholar, wrote this about the God reflected in the writings of the Hebrew prophets:

*To us a single act of injustice -- cheating in business, exploitation of the poor -- is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence; to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world ... Our eyes are witness to the callousness and cruelty of man, but our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience.*

*The prophet ... feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world ... God is raging in the prophet's words.*

Would you want a God who was not raging ... at injustice, at cruelty, at callousness, at indifference?

Our God is indeed a destroying fire.

We read from the Good News Bible this morning, but other English versions of the Bible translate these words somewhat differently. The New Revised Standard Version reads: "For indeed our God is a consuming fire."

A consuming fire. Overwhelming, engulfing -- everything -- just because that is who God is. It's not that God is tossing lightning bolts or throwing fireballs or lighting bonfires in anger. God is a consuming fire. It is a fact of God's existence. God could not be otherwise. God is holy. God is just. God is love. And God is a consuming fire.

So what happens when you are consumed in that holy fire? It depends. It depends on what you are made of. It depends on what God has made of you.

God is a consuming fire ... but fire purifies, too. Fire burns away the dross and leaves ... gold.

God will shake heaven and earth, and all that is impermanent, imperfect, impure will be removed. God will shake heaven and earth, and all that will remain are the things that cannot be shaken. God's kingdom -- which Jesus brought near to us, into which Jesus invites us, into which Jesus will bring this world and its people in ways well beyond our limited imaginations and modest expectations -- God's kingdom cannot be shaken. It will remain, warmed and lighted and purified and energized by God's holy fire.

Our God is indeed a consuming fire.

It is who God is. It is not merely a statement about God as judge, but about God as God. That's what the author of the letter to the Hebrews wants his readers to remember.

They were at risk of giving up, at risk of abandoning their faith, because they paid a great price for following Jesus, the price of emotional and social and material abuse. But he urges them to carry on, to stay the course, to remember all the women and men of faith who have gone before them, to remember Jesus who did not give up because of the cross, but stayed the course for the sake of the joy that was waiting.

And he urges them to remember God, God the holy one, God the consuming fire, before whom the troubles of this world are as nothing! Tremble, not in the presence your human persecutors, but in the presence of the living God! Come into God's presence with awe and with reverence, with humility ... and with gratitude.

Our God is indeed ...

How would you complete that sentence? There is so much we can say, and so much we cannot say, because God is beyond our knowing. But can we say this? Can we say with awe, with reverence, with humility, and with gratitude that our God is indeed a consuming fire?

Would God be God if God were anything less?