

"AFRAID OF THE FIRE"

April 22, 1990

Text: *"...so that the genuineness of your faith more precious than gold though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."*

Normally, when entering a new church and preaching my first sermon, I share my credentials with them. (Not my academic credentials; those are boring.) More or less, my geographic and cultural credentials. For instance, when I first spoke in Iowa, I reassured the people out there that I had familiarity with their state and actual family ties in Des Moines. When I moved to Michigan, I informed them of my previous vacationing in their fine state and some of the friends Mary and I knew there. What can I say about Wauwatosa, Wisconsin? If I begin now, I'm afraid I'll have bitten more off than I can chew. But I will tell you that it is good to be back at the home church and exciting to work with the fellowship programs here. Say nothing of the fact that I'm personally glad to be back in Packer land.

Peterson, Iowa was my first church and I began ministry there five years ago. It is a small town which has felt the typical decline in growth as the younger generation leaves for the big city and the older folks are dying off. One thing they saw in me at Peterson, was youth; and they took good advantage of it. Not too many months after my arrival there I began serving on the Peterson volunteer Fire Department. Being an adventurous sort, I quickly found life on the department fun and sometimes exciting. We were a part of the electronic age and wore pagers which summoned us to our fire calls.

Over time, I fought barn fires, grass fires, and an occasional house fire, but one call we received, in the fall of 1986, involved no fire at all. The pager on my belt sounded off in the early evening and a dispassionate female voice from the communications center in Spencer, Iowa dictated the pertinent information to us over the air waves. *"Peterson Fire Department. Respond to the gas leak at the Farmer's Cooperative Elevator."* I remember thinking at the time how simple this task would be. Some over cautious person was calling us to watch over a little gas leak while we waited for the gas company to fix their problem.

I went down to the station and put on my gear which covered me from head to toe. Upon arriving at the scene, only two blocks away, my heart felt as though it had gotten stuck in my throat. This was no ordinary gas leak. Propane. Huge quantities of propane billowed out of the side of a tanker truck which sat dormant inside of a large garage. Fumes clouded the air and I had to command my legs to move me forward toward the crisis, because I had the overwhelming urge to run the other way.

In the upper left hand corner of the garage was a gas furnace. If that were operational, we would have all disappeared in a raging ball of fire. For some unknown reason, it had fortunately not been started yet that fall. A spark from our pumper engines could have set the gas off. Any number of incidents might have spelled disaster for our department and the town of Peterson. Needless to say, I was caught in a rare moment of life utterly filled with fear. My wife and three week old son were at home and at that time, unknown to me, being evacuated with many others to the far side of town. I did not want to be where I was at either, but had no choice.

Sometime in the evening, our fire chief walked by the section I was working in and commented to us, *"You know men, more than anything else I'm afraid of the fire in this situation."* We stared at him dumbly. In America this could have been the understatement of the year. For those of us there that night, it was the understatement of a lifetime.

Naturally, I've had time to reflect on his words over the past years and would not be a typical preacher if I could not employ them in a sermon. One of the greatest mysteries to humanity is the misunderstanding of the great tempering fire of life. What I mean by this is the constant questioning by people to understand why life can be, at many times, so very difficult and seemingly unfair. Indeed, this is one of the first issues in the bible right after the question of who created us and how we seek to find out why we were put in an often difficult and harsh world where we have to cope with many problems and sorrows. In Genesis, our troubles are blamed on human frailty and original sin.

In the first Letter of Peter we are given a partial and yet, in my opinion, fairly good answer as to why life can be rough and cruel at certain moments. He likens life to the refiner's fire which purifies the gold and makes it cleaner and stronger and thus, more valuable. Just as the prophet Isaiah needed his lips purified by the burning coal before he could speak God's truth, so we need to be purified by the fires of this earthly life that we might strengthen our faith in God.

Quite naturally, we are, so many times, afraid of this fire. We go to great lengths to avoid life's problems for fear they will blow up in our face or cause us great harm. This is partly why I believe we avoid such disturbing issues as the homeless and the poor in our city streets. Why borrow trouble when we have enough of our own? This is just one example of a potential many afflictions our world faces that a majority of us may choose to ignore due to our fairly fortunate circumstances. Just this morning I heard President Bush state in his Earth Day Speech, *"We who are prosperous and have climbed the ladder of economic success must break down the barriers which separate us from the less fortunate and help them - not hinder - toward their prosperity."*

There are many afflictions, however, we cannot avoid which stay on our backs until the day we die. Though we cannot choose to avoid them, we can choose to ignore them as much as possible and then perhaps try and escape the fires of purification and strength. Even so, we have to eventually deal with what persecutes us and the longer put off, the more painful it is in the long run. Such

afflictions may be our daily battle with financial responsibilities. As well, family relationships and dynamics enter into the picture here. Loneliness, health, fitness, happiness, and, well, the list is endless to the possible areas of struggle we all face. Hard as we may try, we cannot ignore the ultimate affliction of life which is, of course, death. Even in that process, people of strong faith are purified and strengthened for better living.

In Peterson, Iowa I did a lot of growing in life and ministry. Because of the aging community it was not a week after I started that I began burying friends I'd made down at the local cafe or around town. The farm depression was in full swing at the time and caused many people in our area to suffer. The "isms" struck ferociously as people looked for an escape from their struggles. Alcoholism to numb them from the pains of life's fire and anti-Semitism to blame the cause of it on someone else. I commend the people of Peterson for their example of faithfulness. Most of them rejected the easy way out and fought their way through the struggles they faced and came out victorious in the end being stronger and more capable to deal with life in every step they took. They kept me in ministry when I was too afraid to keep going, or answer the next phone call, or make the next visit for fear of what I'd find. I was, for a time and sometimes still am, afraid of the fire Peter talks about that ushers us into the uncertain and various pains of life, but also leads us forth as strengthened human beings toward higher challenges and glories. William Barclay declares, *"The trials which come to a man are tests of his faith, and out of them his faith can emerge stronger and clearer and firmer than ever it was before. The rigors which the athlete has to undergo are not meant to make him collapse; they are meant to make him develop more and more strength and staying-power. In this world, trial and affliction are not meant to take the strength out of us, but to put the strength into us."*

Enoch Rucker Blackeslee, the wise grandfather character from the movie "Cold Sassy Tree" was asked by his grandson about the difficulties of life and he responded with this. *"Living is sort of like pouring water into a Coke bottle. If you're the least bit scared you can't do it."* Later his grandson asked him if it were God's will which made life a struggle to live and he said, *"No. Life bullies us son, not God"* Because of the fact that Life bullies us and puts us to the test we always need to exist as people of faith. Those who cast themselves adrift in the sea of anxious living under their own power and guidance cannot find the way toward the safety in God's existence unless some changes are made.

I am reminded of a true story I read about an ordinary man who built a financial empire in the securities business until one day he suffered from a breakdown and was ordered by his doctor to rest and change his lifestyle. He obeyed his doctor and vacationed at a peaceful resort up at Isle Royale, Michigan surrounded by Lake Superior. One day the man took one of the resort's row boats out on the lake and enjoyed the afternoon sun and fresh air. He recalls that he spent much time relaxing in the boat and inadvertently fell asleep and awoke to a clear starry night with no shoreline in sight. Having grown up in the city and paying little heed to nature, this man did not know one star from another, and

hence, which direction to row to reach land. Indeed, he had no knowledge of how far he had drifted from the Island.

At this time he began a prayer, not something he was accustomed to, and asked God to guide him toward shore. If he made it, he would devote half his time to God's direct service. After praying, the man picked the brightest star in the sky, kept his eye on it, and rowed the boat for approximately three hours always watching his star. There came a time when he turned around and looked at the direction he was going and found himself less than 100 feet from the exact dock he left earlier in the day. The man was good to his word and has since, during his business travels and other times, approached people in extreme need and brought them comfort and healing. He only goes to persons and places where God directs him just like the night God gave him a star to find his way back home.

Because sometimes our investments fail, our health deteriorates, our families are in crisis, when loved ones die or we face death itself; we need to keep alive our hope in God. God is watching us in this life and measuring our faith as we take on the fire and become stronger Christians and servants for his Kingdom. God is with us in the fire. To guide us through and be sure that we have no more than we can bear. If this were not so, then we would not be here worshipping today. If this were not so, then we would not be the beneficiaries of his resurrection through Jesus Christ our Lord. If this were not so, then God would not care to walk with us, conquer the affliction of death for us and remain a loving parent for us, his children. The biblical scholar Elmer G. Homrighausen once wrote, *"We are guarded, 'garrisoned,' by the power of God. We are not saved from the wounds of battle, nor are we spared the pains of our mortal existence, but we are personally surrounded and undergirded by a providence that is directed toward each of us personally. God's faithfulness will see us through, and guide us until the complete and perfect salvation is inherited."*

Let us, not now nor ever, retreat from the trials and tribulations life has to offer us. For in such experiences we may seek and find God and come through the end as changed and glorious beings made purer and stronger for the service of his Kingdom. And in our time of dying, we will be a part of his victory over the affliction of death and the eternal peace of his presence.

Amen.