

Wildfire Sunday

We worship with the forest on fire

This work originated with the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania; it can be found online at <https://seasonofcreation.com/worship-resources/liturgies/> and was accessed Sept 17, 2020. It has been adapted, with permission, for the western US by Mark McReynolds PhD (Env. Studies), an Ecopastor with the Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference and Director of the Christian conservation ministry of [SoCal A Rocha](#).



“Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire” Exodus 19:18

Welcome! We worship this Sunday keenly aware of the wind-whipped burning slopes and smoky skies. We worship and wonder why. We worship with compassion for all who suffer in such fires: human beings, fauna and flora. We know Christ suffers with us.

Wildfire Sunday Hymn

Tune: Amazing Grace. Initial lyrics by Norman Habel, 2009; adapted with additions by Mark McReynolds, 2020.

1. Amazing flames that scorch the sky,
like hurricanes of fire.

The pines and firs they blaze away,
the smoke and flames go higher.

2. The swirling balls of flame ablaze,
that spit firebrands for miles,
descend on forests and chaparral,
explode and cause us trials.

3. Responsible we know we are
yet we have little will.
We've not been burning as we should,
so fires are bigger still.

4. We're taught that fire is always bad,
cuz Smoky holds such sway.
But fire in-the-land is natural,
despite what loggers say.

5. When we put all the fires out,
we stockpile all the fuel.
And then when-we-have a fire it is bad
it's then that-they-are most cruel.

6. With record high temperatures,
bark beetles made dead trees.
With fire season much longer now,
it's climate change we see.

7. Once fire is gone the land springs back,
tho trees take years to grow.

The new sunlight and nutrients,
create new life we know.

8. But, you might ask where's God in this?
Where's God in all this pain?
Awaiting in the smoky sky,
to one day send some rain?

9. The work of God is burnt and black;
the work of God has bled!
The God we know in Jesus Christ,
is suffering with the dead.

10. May we all learn through this by fire,
we'll suffer with your Earth,
and with creation we'll declare,
your hope of full rebirth.

Wildfire Sunday

Gathering

Leader In the name of the Maker, who created fire, the name of Christ, who suffers with us in fires, and the name of the Spirit, who appeared as tongues of fire. Amen.

People **Holy! Holy! Holy! Earth is filled with God's presence.**

Leader Christ, we come to into your presence, today, to worship in this sanctuary called Earth,

People **Holy! Holy! Holy! Earth is filled with your presence.**

Leader We invite the "stormy winds" to worship with us,(Ps. 148:8)

People **But when those winds whip up flames into a hurricane of fire, we weep and wonder why.**

Leader We invite pine and fir trees to worship with us, (Ps.148:9)

People **But when those trees fuel swirling balls of fire landing on houses miles away, we weep and wonder why.**

Leader We join with chaparral and forest creatures in praising God, (Ps. 148:10)

People **But when Redwoods are scorched and Condors become cinders, we weep and wonder why.**

Leader We call on all people to celebrate (Ps. 148: 11,12)

People **but when habitats and homes are reduced to ashes, and people die, we weep and wonder why.**

Leader As we remember smoky, wildfire days,

People **we weep and wonder why.**

HYMN Wildfire Sunday Hymn (Amazing Grace) *Text printed above*

Meditation in Worship Together

Leader *(takes pine green needles, crushes them to release the scent of oil, and reflects on our wildfire)*

In the past we knew the 'way' of wildfires. We knew the speed of the fires and the time needed to prepare for the actual flames. We knew how to burn firebreaks to retard the fires. But with climate change, all of these factors changed. We are in a new normal.

People Instead of a cluster of pine trees engulfed in flames, we imagine a tsunami, a wall of fire crashing through towns and leaving nothing in its wake.

Leader Instead of plumes of swirling smoke and burning leaves flying into the sky, imagine a tornado with massive balls of fire leaping over an entire valley and landing on houses on the far hillside.

People Instead of flames fanned by sultry breezes, imagine huge walls of fire with hurricane force winds over 100 miles an hour. Fierce fires with open mouths, consuming all in their path.

- Leader Instead of watching the horizon a few miles away and preparing to evacuate within the hour, imagine that balls of flame and firebrands land on your house. There's virtually no escape.
- People Some of the wildfires of past years were big, but these past years have all set records for acreage burned. We were ready for the old fires, but we have a new normal now. With climate change has come increased hot spells, decreased rainfall, increased droughts, and warmer winter bark beetle invasions. Our unwillingness to let natural fires burn has left decades of fuel on our forest floors. Chaparral habitat that needs flames to renew itself is long overdue for a fire. The increasingly high temperature records and a longer and drier summer make vegetation in our region even more flammable.
- Leader We are not prepared for the annual disasters of wildfires now. Whole towns burn and thousands flee from flames that threaten their homes all along the Pacific Rim, across our deserts and into the Rockies and the Great Plains beyond.
- People Oh God, although we know that you created a world with plants and animals and whole ecosystems that need fire, the fires now come too often and too hot. Wildfire has changed, its fury intensified, and its appetite for acreage far exceeds other fires in bygone days. So - we are now filled with new anxieties as we come before you for assurance – that you do see us and care.

Confession of our Complicity in Sin against Creator and Creation

- Leader Let us confess our anxieties and doubts before our God.
- People Lord, where are you when habitats are destroyed and animals you created are burned alive? Where are you?
- Leader Our Lord replies: Despite the destruction you see I am still in control of all my creation (Job 38-40); not a sparrow falls outside my care (Mt. 10:29). I hear all creation groaning (Romans 8:22) and have a plan to renew all things (Mt.19:28, Col. 1:20).
- People Lord, where are you when firestorms blow through people's homes and so many people suffer? Where are you?
- Leader Our Lord replies: Behold my hands and my feet. I laid down my life for your life. The hairs on your head are counted (Mt. 10: 29). The Father has sent me to be the Savior of the world.
- People If anyone acknowledges Jesus as God's son, then God lives in them and they in God. Know and rely on the love God has for you (1 John 4:14-16).
- Leader As we return to smoky skies or blackened homes,
- People Christ, have mercy.
- Leader As we see habitats in ashes,
- People Christ, have mercy.
- Leader As we struggle to feel fire is natural and that green will return,
- People Christ, have mercy.

Prayer for the Day

- People God, our Creator, as we remember wildfires, we have a sense of compassion as well as doubt. Help us to see the deep, powerful forces you have planted in creation as wondrous and natural, but subject to change by us. Teach us to accept our role in climate change that makes these wildfires so much more ferocious. Activate us to be supportive of new ways of managing our chaparral and woodland habitats in this new normal. In the name of Christ who reconciles and renews all things in creation. Amen.
- Leader Jesus Christ, attune us to the deep mysteries of creation. Make our spirits sensitive to the forces of nature at work around us and the suffering of those who experience these forces in wildfires. Jesus Christ, make our hearts sensitive to the suffering of our kin, cries of agony from the chaparral, the forests and the mountains. Christ, teach us to care. Amen

Readings for Wildfire Sunday

Old Testament: 1Kings 19.1-14 In this text, the themes of all four Sundays are brought into focus. Elijah, running from his responsibility, experiences a fierce storm, an earthquake and a fire. But this time, God's presence was not in any of these. Then he experiences sheer stillness. In the shimmering stillness God's presence is known and a voice is heard. Can that be true for us? Where is our God for us today?

Psalm: Psalm 29 This Psalm celebrates the voice of God thundering in the storm. That voice also flashes forth flames of fire that can consume and strip the forests bare. The voices of creation celebrate this God as king; the voice from Calvary cries 'why?'

Epistle: Acts 2.1-15 The association of fire with the spirit of God may seem striking. That association is explicit at Pentecost and represents a new beginning. Ironically it is the very spirit/wind of God that impels the wildfire. Yet, it is the Christ of the cross who also suffers when the fire rages.

Gospel: Matthew 3.1-12 Jesus promises a baptism of fire by the Holy Spirit. Those who experienced a baptism of fire in the wildfires may wonder whether Jesus knew what such a baptism might mean. Then again, the cry of Christ from the cross reveals that he knew what it meant to feel forsaken. He too suffers in these baptisms of fire.

Passing of the Peace

- Leader Let us share the peace of the Lord with one another.
- People The peace of the Lord be with you

Hymn Selected for the Occasion

Sermon or Reflection Notes

Wildfires are part of the natural ecology known to the Indigenous people of the West for ages and recently by some forest scientists. When we thought of forests as only lumber we tried to keep all fire out. Climate change has made recent wildfires even fiercer, faster, and more deadly than those in past generations. Now, wildfires are more likely to destroy towns and reduce homes to ashes. Where is God in our wildfires today? What does wildfire preparation mean for us? How might we realign our actions to work with the natural ecosystem agent of fire that God has made?

God may have appeared on Sinai in a mighty fire, first to Moses and then to Elijah. Wildfires, however, are not a similar revelation or judgement of this God. They are the expression of wild, natural systems that can run amok due to our greed or ignorance of God's role for fire in the ecosystem. And Christ, the cosmic presence of God among us, experiences these wildfires as we do and suffers with us. In Christ we find compassion and assurance for the future.

Sending Out

- Leader Christ calls you to be his disciples, to serve him with love and compassion, to till and keep all creation so that it and we, and all our kin, may live.
- People We will remember the wildlands! We will groan with all creatures. We will prepare for new wildfires.
- Leader Will you care for creation?
- People We will care for creation! We will learn from nature! We will prepare our neighborhood for safe habitation.

Blessing

- Leader May the Spirit of God, pulsing through Christ within you, who is above all and in all and through all, fill you with the knowledge of God's fingerprint in chaparral and forest, and even fire. And God's care. Go in peace! Serving Christ and loving Earth!
- People We go in peace, serving Christ and caring for people and our planet.

Ending Song