

**FIRE FROM HEAVEN**  
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13th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**2 Kings 2:1-14**

*As Elijah and Elisha continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.*

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A couple Sundays ago, our youth met with a woman whose mission is to alert children and their parents to the dangers of human traffickers. In the discussion that followed, one of the youth innocently and seriously suggested that drones be deployed to track such people and, I suppose, rain down fire on such wicked creeps. Well, that's one way to deal with the problem.

Fire from heaven is a powerful weapon.

Certain presidential candidates and certain pundits on certain cable news networks believe in fire from heaven and gleefully recommend carpet-bombing ISIS, their families and their toxic ideology into oblivion. That's one way to deal with the problem.

Fire from heaven can be a powerful weapon whether it's drones, smart bombs or Khaleesi's fire-spewing dragons in the "Game of Thrones." Whoosh! A thousand instantly scorched. How cool is that?

Fire from heaven is an old fantasy and strategy for destroying one's enemies as comedian George Carlin once remarked about the flamethrower: *The very existence of flamethrowers proves that at some time, somewhere, someone said to themselves, "You know, I want to set those people over there on fire, but I'm just not close enough to get the job done."*

Which brings us to the lessons for today—one from the Old Testament and one from the New. Both feature fire from heaven and suggest that the urge to rain down fire on one's enemy is an old, deep and perennial human urge. I mean, you may even entertain such thoughts about certain people in your world or perhaps your extended family. *"You know (you say to yourself), I want to set my brother-in-law on fire, but I'm just not close enough to get the job done."*

Fire from heaven, as it turns out, is in our hearts and in our hands. The fire that enrages can also convert hate into love, condemnation into mercy. It all depends on what we choose.

Once upon a time the prophet Elijah, who was a wizard of sorts, put a curse on the infidel king of Samaria who had bent his knee to Beelzebub. The King didn't take the curse kindly. So he sent 50 of his troops to teach that wizard a lesson. (2 Kings 1)

The captain of the company ordered Elijah to come down off his perch and submit to the king. And that prompted Elijah to order God to send fire from heaven. And just like that, WHOOSH, the captain and his 50 soldiers were burnt to a barbecue crisp.

The King of Samaria didn't like that one bit and sent 50 more. Same results.

So the king (who apparently was a slow learner) sent 50 more. But this time the captain pled for mercy from the wizard. And he was spared.

Fire from heaven is a powerful weapon. It's like holding firepower in your hand.

Elijah wasn't the first or the last to confuse his own self-righteousness and vengeful impulses with the divine. It's easy to do. Elijah was too blind to see that the so-called Old Testament God is actually full of steadfast love and mercy. It's there if you have eyes to see. It's there to see if we are not blinded by ignorance or self-righteousness.

Elijah's disciple Elisha observed his master's awesome power and begged him to grant him the same. Elijah told Elisha to follow him on his journey to and across the Jordan. *Keep your eyes on me, he said, and if you see me when I'm taken up into heaven, you'll receive the same power.* (2 Kings 2)

Day after day, Elisha followed closely keeping his eyes fixed on his master. And then it happened. A fiery chariot from heaven swept down and raptured Elijah. Whoosh! The wizard was gone in a flash.

When Elisha turned his eyes back to the ground, he saw Elijah's mantle. He picked it up and soon after would use it to destroy his enemies.

One generation learns from the next. But we are not condemned to repeat the past. We can evolve. We can choose differently. Jesus chose another way and so can we.

As a Jewish boy, Jesus was born and raised in the tradition of Elijah, the way we've been raised in the tradition of war: the Revolutionary War, the War between the States, WW II, Hiroshima, and so on and so on. Fire from heaven!

Seven hundred years after Elijah Jesus was on a journey toward Jerusalem, where as the gospel puts it—echoing the story of Elijah—he would be “taken up.” His disciples followed closely.

The journey took them through Samaria the site of Elijah's BBQ. A certain Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus and his Jewish companions. At that time Jews and Samaritans got along about as well as Sunni and Shia Muslims or as Irish Catholics and Protestants once did or as Republicans and Democrats today. The Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus and his Jewish companions.

*Let's call down fire from heaven and destroy this infidel village,* shouted one of Jesus' disciples. No, said Jesus. Elijah might have done that. But that is not our way. We will love our enemies. We will treat others as we want to be treated. We will practice mercy, not revenge. We will not remain childish.

It's not easy overcoming the urge to retaliate against national or personal enemies. It's one reason Jesus was not quick to encourage people to follow his way. It's a hard path. If we can't follow, he doesn't condemn. He understands. If you can't walk that way today, maybe you can tomorrow.

Jesus invites. He doesn't demand. Love is patient. It doesn't demand its own way. Love is kind. And love is hard work.

Many Americans, like the disciples of Jesus, still fantasize about fire from heaven. That's one way to destroy an enemy and many still believe in that way. But it is not the way of Jesus. It's childish.

It's one thing to be born again. Nothing wrong with that. But it's something else to grow up and become an adult. The fire within can destroy the world or it can create a world of universal kinship.

We all have reasons to be afraid. Fear is a healthy and normal reaction to danger. We can't control our reactions. But we can control our responses if we open our hearts to the Spirit within.

Touch us with truth

that burns like fire, with beauty  
that moves us like the wind;  
and set us free, Lord,  
free to try new ways of living.  
(Ted Loder)