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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X39
Evensong 20 Special Evensong California Fires
Thursday 12 October 2017

Exodus 3:1-12
Luke 24:13-35

In the Face of Fire

"Were not our hearts burning within us..." (Luke 24)

During the Vietnam War my friend's twenty-year-old cousin Steve took all his money, everything that he had saved on his paper route for eight years, and left the country. He moved to England where he spent the whole sum on a beautiful, varnished-wood, 1920's-era sailing sloop. He lived a nearly perfect life on that boat with his wife Ruth. For two years they would sail to small ports on the south coast of England while he made a modest living as a skilled carpenter and cabinetmaker.¹

Eventually the two crossed the English Channel on the way to visiting Steve's sister in Holland. While they were at a harbor in Northern France a storm came up. Because Steve didn't understand French he missed the radio reports which warned about the severity of the storm. They continued on their way.

Very soon after they left Steve realized that he had made a terrible mistake. Strong winds and huge ocean swells made it impossible to return to the safety of the harbor. It seemed as if they would lose their lives on this boat. Steve even tied Ruth to the mast so that she wouldn't go overboard.

As the storm drove them toward land, Steve fought to make it out to deep water but was steadily pushed back until the boat was driven onto the beach and they were rescued. People on the shore watched their sloop along with five other boats being pounded into splinters in the heavy surf.

Years later in their house, they had a starkly beautiful picture of the waves breaking over the boat. Steve would say, "I love that photograph. It reminds me of the day we lost everything. That was the most important moment in my life." He goes on, "It shaped the course of everything that happened later."

Today we are in the midst of a massive unfolding disaster. 170,000 acres have burned. No fire is more than 5% contained.² Lives are being lost, workshops and homes and all they contain destroyed. The skies are choking us with the ashes of our friends' homes. We are breathing in their family photo albums, packs of burning love letters from last

century, wedding dresses, children's toys and furniture carefully passed down through the generations.

I keep hearing from more friends who have lost everything. People are asking me, "Where is God in all this?" Perhaps questions like this don't get us anywhere. But maybe we also can't stop asking them. Strangely enough today I have a kind of provisional answer.

When Heidi and I were young our house burned down too. All these years later and I still miss things that we lost. At the time I didn't realize it but it was the perfect preparation for serving at St. Clement's Church Berkeley. One quarter of all the parishioners there had lost their homes in the Oakland Fire.

I learned a few things from these experiences. First, amazingly enough most of those people who lost everything in the fire would tell me. "Those were only things! What really matters is that we're okay!" Another thing I realized is that being part of a community saves lives. Dozens of people were saved because their neighbors realized something was wrong and went to look for them. We depend on each other. What I remember most about our own fire is the people who took care of us and the love I still feel for them.

This is what I think that Steve meant by saying that losing everything in the shipwreck was the most important moment in his life. Like me he loved Jesus. Part of the reason we do is that there is something invisible to us in our everyday life that can become clear in moments like this.

When the disciples encounter Jesus walking along the road, at first they do not recognize him. But in sharing stories, a meal and ultimately ourselves we begin to see past the surfaces of life to what really matters.

The greatest miracle is the simple gift of our life. Whether we are suffering or rejoicing God is always present. We feel that presence more profoundly when we really begin to see each other. When we look deeply into the humanity that we share. When we offer help. Even when we depend on others.

Tonight we are dedicating our collection to people who are suffering from the fires. I pray that God will help us to see Christ hidden in our own situation. I pray that God will protect us from harm and give us hearts to love each other.

¹ Donald Schell conversation Wednesday 11 October 2017. Clarification email 12 October 2017.

² "Notes and Resources," San Francisco Emergency Operations Center Community Branch Call #1, 12 October 2017.