“I have come to hurl fire upon the earth! And how I wish it were already burning”

-Jesus in the Gospel of Luke 12:49

Jeremiah 23:23-29
Psalm 82
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Fire: it churns relentlessly, licking and devouring, mercilessly, straw and hillside and home in many parts of the West Coast; it dances lyrically in the great Olympic cauldron down in Rio; it crackles in the coals we use to cense the altar, and, of course, ourselves; it bursts with explosive force taking the lives of innocent people in marketplaces across the Middle East. Fire, mesmerizing and dangerous, has stirred the human imagination for millions of years, since we first saw lightning fall from the sky with its blue and beautiful fury. We cook with it, and it may cook us, too. The source of life and of death not only here in some narrow way, but cosmically as all life on the planet’s surface takes its strength from the sun. The ancients intuited this; ancient Greek philosophers believed that the world was made of fire because when something is lit on fire it becomes fire until all that’s left is this inchoate stuff.

A little known fact: one of the many threads of continuity running from ancient Greece to the Olympics in our own time is the insistence that the Olympic flame be kindled not by any human artifice of combustion, but by the sun’s own natural heat. Gathered and focused by mirrors a flame appears, and that’s actually when the Olympics officially begin. Muscles contract and pull ligament and bone at fire’s command. Our bodies nerves depend on the successful transfer of energy along the axon, like a fuse hissing and spitting, till it explodes with force in a single visible movement: a swing of the arm, a flexing of the thigh, the sudden freeze of fluent action across a beam or rings as the body appears to be suspended mid-air, turgid and taut, and our own attention completely rapt and suspended. Our own cathedral was born from a fire that destroyed most of San Francisco in 1906, including the Crocker mansions that use to stand on this site. We come from fire.
Whoever wrote the Letter to the Hebrews had a bone to pick with that community. The author saw within that community a terrible disease; they had become spiritually sick, and we hear part of the diagnosis today. They were supposed to pay attention, to fix their eyes on Christ - like a good athlete they needed to keep their head in the game so that they could attain the prize. But somewhere along the way, they lost their way. They grew slack. They stopped believing. Sure, they kept going to church, but they had lost their fire. But who can blame them? I know I don’t. I don’t sit here in judgement of them. It’s easy to lose our fire: there are countless reasons to become discouraged, to give up, or even just to settle. In many ways, settling is actually the most dangerous because we don’t even notice when it happens. It just happens.

I read the Letter to the Hebrews, and I can’t help but hear in it a word for our Church, for the Episcopal Church. And I can’t help but think about the important role our cathedral has played in the life of that Church. Grace Cathedral has played a pivotal part in keeping our collective fire alive, in challenging and inviting the wider Church into a dynamic vision of what it means to follow this Jesus who came to bring fire to the world, who encouraged us to read the signs of the times at any given moment and to take those signs seriously. Actually that word isn’t “bring” – that’s a bad translation of the Greek word there, “βαλεῖν,” which actually means here “to throw, to hurl or to cast.” I suspect the translators chose “to bring,” βαλεῖν’s weaker sense, in order to temper the incendiary tone of the passage. But as I’ve said before, there’s something wild in God that will not be contained, and His Christ comes to us as One who is consumed with zeal for his Father’s House, his whole life is like Holy Mount Zion wreathed in flame as the Holy One visits His people to set them on a course that would change the whole world. Fire. Revolution. Change.

We’ve known that Jesus, and in many ways we’ve followed the Pillar of Fire ahead of the rest of own Church to places we didn’t know we’d go: long before they were popular, we pioneered the way on labor justice and civil rights and women’s leadership; we faced into the homelessness crisis and started the Episcopal Community Services, which to this day offers the most shelter of any organization in the city; we insisted on the full dignity of the LGBT members of our community and our world, and when much of the Church turned away from the AIDS crisis either in scorn or fear, we doubled down on welcome, paving the way for new
relationship by offering an example that would become to norm for the wider Church in time. After the AIDS crisis left Lauren Artress and much of our cathedral staff at that time spiritually exhausted - and witnessing the profound need men and their families had to be in their bodies, to pray with their bodies, to seek and find center in a world that felt like it had spun out of control - Lauren, true to her call as a pastor, sought out and discovered a tool to help them and to help us: the labyrinth. Igniting a spiritual movement that has taken the Church and the world by storm, in only twenty years there are literally thousands of labyrinths all over the world in nearly every conceivable location, but especially in places of distress and crisis: in hospitals, in prisons, in schools, in places like South Africa where Reconciliation Labyrinths are used to bring together former enemies. Nina Pickerel began Bayview mission from her own home! Today it serves thousands of families every single year in one of the most underserved and under-resourced parts of the city, and is a cause of pride for this cathedral. Under Darren Main’s visionary leadership, our yoga practice has ballooned like a fireball, causing not a little bit of heat among those who think that maybe it’s not proper for a church to offer a yoga class, much less to treat it as a spiritual community on par with our Sunday congregation.

Many quarters of the Church have a very limited vision of what Christian mission means: it’s offering some kind of Christian experience for people to ether accept or reject, or else they focus exclusively on the vital work of social mission. Social Mission or Social Outreach is hugely important – no authentic spiritual community is complete without it, and in many ways it expresses our entire raison d’êtres. But many have forgotten the equally important work of Spiritual Mission, or Spiritual Outreach. They’ve forgotten that the Temple in Jerusalem included the Court of the Gentiles, an outer court where the nations could be present in the holy precincts without fully entering in. I believe Jesus the pioneer of our faith, who blazes the trail before us, smiles upon our yoga community that gathers on Tuesdays nights, and walks with everyone who steps foot on a labyrinth whether they ever know or acknowledge it. Because that’s who God is. Grace Cathedral shows forth the character of God in a splendidly generous way that can be an example for the whole Church.

One of the great gifts, and I believe our high calling as a cathedral uniquely positioned at an urban crossroads of east and west, of wealth and poverty, of technology and nature, land and sea is that we can continue this tradition of
leading the wider Church into the kind of innovation that we need to get back into the game. We must do so leading from a vision of what it means to take both social and spiritual mission seriously. Already, and I know that for generations to come, we will continue to guard the venerable flame of our glorious Anglican tradition so tenderly held in this particular service, which warms and illuminates with intellectual teaching and a classical choral tradition that truly expresses the discipline of worshipping God in the beauty of holiness. It is so powerful and so compelling for so many of us. And I also believe that we are at a new crossroads, that Jesus is calling us to interpret the signs of our times, of this time, and to rekindle that fire of vision once again that sees sometime extending from that tradition, and even beyond it to a place we don’t yet see or know. A Land of Promise to which we are called, but which we do not yet inhabit.

The religious landscape of our city is rapidly changing, and its following a trend that we see in the wider culture and even globally. Pentecostalism is on the rise. This movement that began here in the United States, just south of us in LA at the famous Azusa Street revivals, which looks to that moment when tongues of fire descended on the first apostles, filling them with power, and setting them on fire for God, this movement continues to sweep over our world, spreading like a wildfire. Whether under the banner of the new charismatic evangelicalism that has become the dominant face of Christianity in our nation, or one of its many expressions in Central and South America and Africa rapidly displacing Roman Catholicism, the Christianity of our day is marked out in profound way by this fire. In our own city, many churches following on this momentum are flourishing, attracting thousands of young people from every conceivable part of the Bay Area and every walk of life. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. And I take it as an invitation to follow the smoke to the fire. And it’s my particular gift that that is my work here.

God has lit our world on fire. God has lit us, and so many other churches around us, with passion and determination and fervent devotion for the Christian vision. And all of us collectively, and each in very different ways face this question: “will we as an institution, as a Church, be willing to lay aside the weights that encumber us, to embrace the profound change that may be necessary to meet people where they are rather than insisting that come to us on our terms. I believe Grace Cathedral has answered that question before with a resounding “yes,” and I believe we’re called to answer it again. Last week our dean preached
an inspiring sermon about God’s desire to give us the Kingdom. I can’t tell you what a gift it is to serve with a leader who deeply believes that in his heart, and who at every turn has supported my work and vision for spiritual mission in this place, whether it’s yoga or fresh forms of gathering and worship. What a blessing it’s been to visit sister churches in the Bay Area with him and some of you, and to see his own passion for our future as we look to examples of the Spirit’s fire alive and well in other parts of the Church. It is such a blessing to be part of something so much bigger than ourselves.

We have that wonderful phrase in Hebrews, “so great a cloud of witnesses,” and it’s set in the context of an encouragement: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight...and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” In Bible study, we learn that word “witness (μαρτύριον)”, refers in the biblical context to the martyrs, who by offering a legal testimony to their Christian faith were often landed in jail, and killed in the very same stadiums where athletic and gladiatorial contests like the Olympic games were held. We have an image here, then, not only of legal witnesses, but also of spectators in the stands.

In ancient Olympia forty thousand pilgrims from all the great city states of the Panhellenic world – from Delphi and Rhodes, from Athens and Sparta, and from the colonies in southern Sicily – would all gather and converge on this incredible site for about five days, huddled around a much more intimate stadium than our massive colosseums and stadiums, watching and scrutinizing every movement of these athletes. We have here an image of spectators, spectators in stands cheering us on by their example, by their self-giving which made a way when it seemed no way could be made. These were they who believed in God’s promises, and who in every generation bore the flame in order to pass it on to future generations. The Olympics begin each year with the famous lighting of the cauldron, but weeks before that happens a flame is lit in Greece at the Temple of Zeus and Hera, and carried over many countries and continents, and passed on by literally thousands of people, young and old.

We, too, are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses enshrined in stained glass, evoked by paint, or brought to life in stone. The cathedral’s beautiful interior isn’t just decoration; it’s a story of those who have passed the torch in ages past, who have run with perseverance keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus. These are they who,
by rights, should have packed up and gone back east after the earthquake and fire leveled their city in 1906, but they didn’t. Instead they doubled down, building bigger and higher and grander than anyone could ever imagine. If our presiding bishop were here, he’d say they were some crazy Christians, and I would have to agree. If you listen through the stone and stained glass and paint, you can still hear them cheering us on; you can see them holding out the torch, and they’re urging us to take it up again.