

In 1905 by an act of Congress the responsibilities of several federal agencies were consolidated into the newly-renamed United States Forest Service. This new agency was charged with the task of managing the nation's forests, to preserve them for the public good, and to administer their use.

Everyone agreed, it seems, that a tremendous national treasure like our forests must be protected. It became the national policy to fight fires, vigorously. Any forest fire, any wildfire, was met immediately with the full resources of the US government, and it was extinguished as soon as was practical. No president, no senator, wanted Yellowstone to burn on his watch. No one wanted people's homes to be threatened for a lack of firefighting funds. No one wanted to see national treasures like Rocky Mountain National Park or the giant redwoods of California go up in smoke. So when there was a fire, we made it our business to put it out.

A century later, there is virtual unanimity among forest scientists that this is a bad way to manage forests. People who study ecosystems know that fire is a necessary part of the life cycle of most woodlands. Seeds are germinated after exposure to high heat. Canopies are opened for

younger trees. The soil is enriched by the ash. Over millions of years, forests have evolved to burn, to be renewed from time to time by the sweeping heat of fires. It is not science, but institutional and cultural inertia, that keeps our current policies going; it is only from our perspective that the fires are a bad thing, only when we look at the beauty of a mature forest, or the pathos of a family whose home is threatened, or at the lives lost in the flames do we imagine that they must be extinguished at all costs. And if you doubt how pervasive the anti-fire culture in this country is, you need only say with me their slogan; say it with me: Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires. We who are invested in the status quo are the quickest to call for its preservation. We know by rote and by instinct how important it is to keep these wildfires from burning, because we cannot imagine things any other way than the way they are now.

In July of 1415, a priest and theologian named Jan Hus was burned at the stake for heresy against the church. That same year, an Englishman named John Wycliffe was posthumously declared a heretic, and a decade or so later his remains were dug up and burned, along with his books, and the ashes thrown into a river. In 1536, William Tyndale was

imprisoned and then later choked and impaled to death. His views had been declared heretical, but his real crime had been translating the Bible into English. There were less famous figures: Jerome of Prague, burned in 1416 for supporting Wycliffe, Savonarola, burned in 1498 for opposing the Pope, Peter Waldo, exiled and forced into hiding. All of these before figures like Martin Luther and John Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the ones who we read about in the history books.

It sounds funny to call the actions of the church against these men fire suppression, given how many of them were burned at the stake, but that is what the church was doing: it was suppressing wildfires however it could. They kept popping up, and burning strong: Hus and Jerome in Prague, Wycliffe and Tyndale in Britain, Savonarola in Florence, plumes of smoke rising from the landscape all over Europe, and the church kept sending out firefighting teams to extinguish the flames. And it worked for a while, as far as policies go, just like putting out all the wildfires in the US worked for a while. People who disagreed with the church or had new ideas largely kept quiet about it, because to say something probably meant to die. And probably a great many good and well-meaning people were counted among the firefighters: difficult

measures, they might have reasoned, should be taken to preserve something as important as the church.

But as we've seen this summer and in summers past, you can only suppress fires for so long. You can only put out the small fires for so long until you are faced with a big fire, fed by all the accumulated fuel that should have been burned years ago, but which has piled up, now a tinderbox ready to ignite. That is what has happened in Texas this year, and in California and here in Colorado last year, and in places all over the country in 2006, the worst wildfire year on record. We have stymied nature's cycles of burning and regrowth, leaving forests choked with underbrush and dead trees, so that when the fires do burn they burn much hotter and much more widely than usual, and they end up completely destroying the forests instead of renewing them—completely destroying those forests that our policies were designed to protect in the first place.

That's what happened to the church. It suppressed fires for so long that one day the fire was too hot, too big, too fast to control. And that is what we call the Protestant Reformation, a great and dramatic fire that swept

Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and set the church aflame. Rather than the smaller, less dramatic changes that would have happened naturally, the church found itself burning to the ground. That is what we celebrate today, on Reformation Day. For us, from our perspective as Protestants, this was a victory, but from the perspective of the institutional church, it was a catastrophe.

So here we are, four or five centuries later, and our church is no longer the upstart sapling that grew in the wake of the great fire. It is the tall tree that has the most to lose. And we are no longer the brush fires burning everywhere, being frantically extinguished by others, but we are the firefighters, the ones sent to put out the flames of change at any cost. We have to realize on this Reformation Day that we are the institution now; we are the ones invested in the status quo. We have become the defenders of the cherished tradition.

We might protest that we, here at First Plymouth, are surely to be counted among those still reforming, still remaking the church, still burning to make room for the new saplings. And maybe that's true, but if it is true, there seems to be a difference between the way we see

ourselves and the way others see us. Ours doors are not being beaten down by people who see in us a new way. There seems to be nothing about the way we look to the world that suggests change, nothing that says, "here are people who are willing to do something new." I'm not saying that many or most of us don't want to do something new, I'm just saying that it apparently doesn't look that way from the outside, because no one is showing up here expecting that. At best, it seems, we are a church that is less fanatical about stamping out the flames than other churches, but we are still not a church that is known for just letting the fires burn.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can look back at the fire suppression policies of the US Forest Service, and say that they would have done better to let some of those fire burn, to let some of the old get cleared away sometimes. And with the benefit of hindsight, we can look at the actions of the church in the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and we can say that they would have done better to tolerate dissent, to give space to new ideas, to let some of those fires burn, rather than put them all out as quickly as possible. With the benefit of hindsight, what will people someday say about us? What will they think of our actions, or inactions?

Will they say that we have been open to change in such a way that the small fires have cleared out the underbrush and kept the ecosystem running smoothly? Or will they say that we have stamped out every flame, only to be engulfed ultimately by a fire too strong for us to control?

Standing in our tradition as Protestants, as the insurrectionists or if you will the arsonists of the Reformation, what is the faithful response to the circumstances we now face? Finding our forest choked by the underbrush of our own good intentions, how should we move forward? Surrounded by declining denominations and congregations, budget shortfalls, empty pews across the mainlines, and a few lonely voices asking if maybe we ought to do church differently, all like so many whispers of smoke rising from across the landscape, as people born of the Reformation, what is the faithful response? Seeing the flames beginning to rise from the forest, what should we do?

It's not easy to watch a beloved forest burn. It's not fun to see something you love go up in smoke, because that forest has been important, because something good is lost in the burning. But what we can't always

see, what our Protestant Reformation heritage ought to teach us, is that often there is more to be gained in the flames than there is to be lost. That stately, mature forest with towering trees isn't natural, or at least it isn't natural for long; it's meant to pass away to make room for something new. The old, established denominations and churches, like our denomination and church, aren't meant to live forever; they are meant to give way to something newly born, something freshly alive. That's not something to mourn, or at least not something to mourn for very long. That is something to celebrate.

So what should we do? What should we do? The scripture this morning describes the moment of moving from one place to another. The metaphor is water instead of burning, crossing a river instead of burning a forest, but the idea isn't all that different. When you cross over from wilderness to promised land, this passage is saying, don't do it without purpose. Don't cross over as an afterthought. Be intentional about how you step into that river Jordan, because you only get one chance to go from here to whatever is over there.

I propose, in the spirit of the Reformation, that we be purposeful about letting the fires burn. When we find our habits entrenched and our traditions stale, let us register that as a whiff of wood smoke in the air, and let us smile at what is coming. When we find our budgets stretched, our pews thinning, and our orthodoxies challenged, let us see that as a cloud of smoke on the horizon, and let us begin walking in the direction of the fire. And when we fear for our buildings and our staff and wonder if this will all be here for our children, I am proposing that we understand that those are flames, and that we break into dance and song, because it will mean that something new is about to be born. It's only catastrophe from this side of the flames. This is the lesson of the Protestant Reformation; out of the ashes of the old will come something alive, springing up into the light. And so I say: let it burn. Amen.