

Immanuel United Church
August 15th, 2021

Welcome

Call to Worship:

We gather in this holy place — to hear the still, small voice of God.

We come willing to listen, attentive to the voice speaking inside us.

May our minds rest, just as our bodies are stilled.

**May the aches and longings of our hearts
be met by the quiet love found here.**

Let us breathe out all that distracts us.

And breathe in all that calms us.

Prayer:

Thank you, O God of Loving-kindness, Wisdom, and Justice,

That your Spirit is within us.

Help us to recognize you in ourselves and in others,

That we might work with you for the healing of the world. Amen.

Hymn: VU 291 *All Things Bright and Beautiful*

Scripture: Psalm 104

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honour and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,

you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,

fire and flame your ministers.

You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.

You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.

At your rebuke they flee;

at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.

You set a boundary that they may not pass,

so that they might not again cover the earth.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

May the glory of the Lord endure for ever;
may the Lord rejoice in God's works—
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to God,
for I rejoice in the Lord.

Reflection: What the Bible says about “smoke”

Today, I hope to think about “smoke” with you. Do you know that there are more than 40 (perhaps even more) quotes about smoke in the Bible?

Many cultures around the world acknowledge that our earth and life are made up of some essential elements like soil/earth, water, fire, and wind. If there's fire, smoke is a sure sign of its presence.

Some kinds of smoke are good, and people use them intentionally, enjoy them, or even use them to entertain others. What are these kinds of smoke?

I love burning incense, especially sandalwood. It reminds me of very pleasant times in my past, when I went with family or friends to visit a mountain cabin made of oak and a Buddhist temple on a peaceful, quiet evening with drizzling rain. Smudging with sage is considered particularly sacred and cleansing across a variety of cultures and belief systems. I grew up hearing this Bible quote a lot at church: "For we are the aroma of Christ." (2 Corinthians 2:15). Mom taught me that we should try to be like the aroma of Christ for others and among people. I sometimes pondered what that actually meant – was the aroma of Christ like the incense we used in church? 'No,' I thought, 'the aroma of Christ must smell like a fragrant flower!' We use smoke for food too. Many of us enjoy smoked salmon. Once we start thinking about the good-smelling smoke in our lives, it's easy to call up the memory of special times and places.

On the other hand, the smoke we smell more often these days, especially this summer, is deeply concerning. With the rapid escalation of climate change, wildfires are raging through the West Coast of Canada and the United States, as well as Manitoba and Ontario. Not only on the hazy-sky days, the scent of smoke lingers in the air, its pollution level affecting those with asthma. I've seen that some forests have lost the glorious explosion of light they contain; they seem to struggle from the ill-effects of smoke and drought. It took a full two days of pouring rain and thunderstorm for the woods near the Seine River to show their luminous beauty in clarity. My sister-in-law, who just moved to Calgary, told me a month ago that it was hard to see anything farther than 1 meter clearly. Smoke, in this case, is the concentration of black carbon particulates - commonly called soot - over North America, one of several types of particles and gases found within wildfire smoke.

This week, while looking through the kitchen windows at the Seine River trail that finally beamed again with a "light bomb", I wondered if the Bible ever spoke about smoke, and Googled it. Voila! There are more than 40 or 50 mentions of smoke, likely more. Curiosity led me into thinking about smoke, more theologically (meaning, its relation to our relationship with God and the world/Earth).

Here's my question: If the world we live in, the lives we have, are "scripture", what would smoke mean to us? The living things in the Bible are not fundamentally different from the living things we see in our lives. There are trees, birds, fish, wind, water, air. Of course, some books in the Bible tell us about interesting creatures with wings, mythical beasts and speaking angels just like storytellers in our time draw monsters, heroes, and magicians in movies. In the living scripture, monsters and smoke may represent important, extraordinary messages that we, the characters,

can ponder deeply. Reflect on them in terms of our relationship with God and the world/Earth. All of a sudden, our own lives become the new context for living scripture! So, I would like to share the question again with you: What if the world we live in, the lives we have, are scripture, the ongoing story of God at work in the world? What would smoke mean to us? More than just complaining, shouldn't we do something more meaningful, spiritual, faithful, as our response to it?

In the Bible, smoke usually means God's presence: God's accompaniment in the journey of the Hebrew people; God's encouragement or protection; God's anger; God's justice. Let's look at several pieces about smoke from the Bible:

Exodus 19:18 Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.

Isaiah 6:4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of God who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

Exodus 20:18 All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.

Psalms 104:32 Bow Your heavens, O Lord, and come down;
Touch the mountains, that they may smoke.

Isaiah 4:5 Then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy.

Isaiah 30:27
Behold, the name of the Lord comes from a remote place;
Burning is God's anger and dense is God's smoke;
God's lips are filled with indignation
And God's tongue is like a consuming fire;

Isaiah 34:10
It will not be quenched night or day;
Its smoke will go up forever.
From generation to generation it will be desolate;
None will pass through it forever and ever.

Joel 2:30
"I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth,
Blood, fire and columns of smoke.

Revelation 8:4

And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand.

2 Corinthians 2:15

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;

The intention of sharing the quotes in the Bible is to invite us to ponder and reflect on our lives, on what is happening in our lives, in terms of our relationship with God and the Earth. I believe that engaging with scripture as if it is an ongoing story, a story that involves us, is a way we faithfully engage with God in our lives, in the world. This summer's smoke is a sure sign of climate change; what is our faithful, spiritual response to it? What should we do, what can we do? If our own lives, our world, is the new context for God's message, the Earth's calling... If our world is the "living scripture" we live our lives in, we must stop and ponder before the presence of smoke and ask what it means to us. We need to pause and sense God's struggle, message and hope in the sign and presence of smoke, rain, drought, and engage in the hard work of living in it, fighting it, changing it. God still speaks. Blessings.

Hymn: VU 371 ***Touch the Earth Lightly***

Prayers of the People:

Indwelling Holy Spirit

of gathering and connection

let us feel your gentle breeze of presence,

let our hearts open to your light.

Breathe deeply into us now.

We pray for all affected by climate change,

in the world and in Canada,

on these hot days in BC where a little swimming pool in the backyard

can be as warm as a bathtub.

Under the hazy skies due to smoke and pollution over the world,

we are sorry that our children and their children's children would face the cloudy tomorrow,

if we do not unite our forces to fight climate change today.

Breathe deeply into us now.

In ways we cannot mistake or misunderstand,

breathe into us and teach us:

How to be just and forgiveness,

How to nurture one another,

and how to connect/reconnect to the Holy in other people and in creation.

Breathe deeply into us now.

Sometimes we are on fire with concern and passion.

Sometimes we sit quietly and hold the space.

Sometimes we have tears or fears, pain or doubt.

Through this, may all the comfort and assurance of your love be always with us when we listen for your direction.

Breathe deeply into us now.

Give us the language, the songs, the images, the voice, the expressions to relate the good news offered to those who wait for you.

Fill us, awake us, inspire us, teach us. Heal us.

Indwelling Holy Spirit, breathe deeply into us now. Amen.

Hymn: VU 625 ***I Feel the Winds of God***

Benediction:

God's love to guide our journey;

Jesus' life to show us the way;

Spirit's spark to light the path;

Go in peace to love and serve others.