

The Wired Word

Wildfires & Spiritual Dryness

Sunday, September 20, 2020

9:00-9:45am

In Person or Zoom

Student Handout

Dear Class Member,

Wildfires are especially severe and widespread in the U.S. West right now, partly due to an extended high-temp heat wave and dry conditions. This news gives us an opportunity to think about spiritual dryness, and how that can affect our souls and our experience of faith in Christ. So that will be the topic of our next class.

During this time of social distancing to control the spread of the virus, *The Wired Word* is including in the TWW student version the full lesson, with all the biblical commentary and additional discussion suggestions normally available only in the teacher's version.

How To Participate:

We are offering the Wired Word as a hybrid class. You can participate in person or via Zoom. The Wired Word will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings.

For those meeting in person, we will be in the old social hall of the church building (located on the first floor). If participating in person, please come with a mask and follow the COVID-19 Safety Guidelines for Sunday School:

<http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/news.html#COVID19Precautions>

You can also participate in the Wired Word virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by phone by calling: +1 301 715 8592 US (Germantown)

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220

Passcode: 195152

To subscribe or unsubscribe to the weekly mailing of The Wired Word student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



87 Wildfires Burning in 10 U.S. States

The Wired Word for the Week of September 20, 2020

In the News

While it is not uncommon to have some wildfires in the Western states in late summer and fall, the number of fires at present -- 87 across the Western states -- and the amount of acreage being scorched -- more than 4.6 million acres in 10 states -- mean this year's blazes are disrupting lives for tens of millions of people. Although the burned acreage so far is less than half of that burned in 2017, the affected area is still massive. In Oregon alone, nearly 500,000 people -- 10 percent of the entire state's population -- have either evacuated or have been told to be ready to leave.

As of Tuesday, at least 35 people have died in the wildfires, including 24 in California, 10 in Oregon and a child in Washington state. There are also 22 people in Oregon listed as "missing."

Residents near 39 large fires in California, Oregon, Washington and Colorado remain under evacuation orders.

As of September 11, according to the National Interagency Fire Center, "Nearly 28,000 firefighters and support personnel are assigned to wildfires across the West."

States having large fires include Arizona (1), California (25), Colorado (4), Idaho (12), Montana (9), Nevada (1), Oregon (13), Utah (5), Washington (15) and Wyoming (2). The totals do not include individual fires within complexes. And observers on the ground mention significant fires in some other Western states as well. (These figures were accurate on Tuesday; they may have changed by the time you use this lesson.)

Many people have lost their homes, and the regional economy, already hard hit by the coronavirus outbreak, is further strained. Many residents not directly in the path of the fires are nonetheless affected by the toxic smoke billowing across the region.

Conditions, especially a combination of a record-breaking heat wave, dry winds and the absence of precipitation have made the West more susceptible to fires this year and have triggered explosive growth of the conflagrations once they start, whether ignited by lightning or other causes.

Many climate scientists attribute the weather conditions to human-caused climate change, while some others argue that the high temperatures and duration of the heat waves are part of a natural long-term climate cycle. Still others argue that inadequate forest management, such as a lack of more frequent controlled burns, has added to the fire danger. Whatever the case, it seems clear that the heat, drought and dryness contribute to the risk for the number, frequency and size of the wildfires.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Deadly Wildfires Rage Across the US West Coast. *CNN* (<https://www.cnn.com/us/live-news/west-coast-wildfires-09-14-2020/index.html>)

National Preparedness Level 5. *National Interagency Fire Center* (<https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/nfn.htm>)

Total Wildland Fires and Acres (1926-2019). *National Interagency Fire Center* (https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_stats_totalFires.html)

Western Wildfires: An 'Unprecedented,' Climate Change-Fueled Event, Experts Say. *The Washington Post* (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2020/09/11/western-wildfires-climate-change/>)

How Misguided Environmentalism Is to Blame for California's Wildfires. *The Federalist*

(<https://thefederalist.com/2018/11/16/misguided-environmentalism-blame-californias-wildfires/>)

Wildfires During Pandemic Intensify Economic Pain in West. *ABC News*

(<https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/wildfires-intensify-economic-pain-west-73005967>)

Because of Fire, West Coast Has Four of the World's 10 Most Polluted Cities. *Los Angeles Times*

(<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-09-13/north-complex-fire-weather-gusty-winds>)
Oregon City 'Looks as Though a Bomb Went Off' as Fires Continue to Scorch the West Coast. *CNN*
(<https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/13/us/us-west-fires-sunday/index.html>)

Applying the News Story

The wildfires, feeding on dry, brittle flora and exacerbated by winds containing little or no moisture, can serve as a metaphor for spiritual dryness. That's a term Christians sometimes use to characterize their feeling of being distant from God, experiencing an absence of spiritual energy or of feeling that their prayers are either not heard or are not answered.

So spiritual dryness -- and what it may mean or not mean -- is the topic of this lesson.

The Big Questions

1. Can the lack of inner assurance mean that a person who has accepted Christ has not been accepted *by* Christ? Can it mean that that person has fallen away from Christ? Can it be an indicator of something other than having fallen away, and if so, what? Can our lack of spirituality have something to do with the toxic changes in a person's society (friends and acquaintances) or subculture?
2. How can we distinguish between a dry spiritual period and actual resistance against the Holy Spirit?
3. When it is helpful to talk about our feelings of spiritual emptiness or dryness, and with whom should we talk? Why?
4. Do you think the matter of spiritual assurance is less important to some Christians than to others? Why? Are some personality types less susceptible to the "feeling" side of faith than others? How important is it to you that you "feel" your faith? Why?
5. What can we do when spiritual dryness sets in so that we rebound and rejoice in the Lord's mercy and love? How does our dryness affect others? What slakes our thirst for God?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Psalm 63:1

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (For context, read 63:1-8.)

Psalm 13:1-2

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (For context, read 13:1-6.)

Both of these psalms are composed very much from the seeker's point of view.

In Psalm 63, the seeker, the psalmist, "thirsts" strongly for God, and if we read on, he or she finds God, for verse 2 speaks of beholding God's power in the sanctuary (probably a reference to the temple in Jerusalem). Verse 1 would also seem to describe the circumstances of many who after initially beholding God's power and grace -- perhaps in a personal encounter with God -- discover that subsequent seeking after God does not bring reinforcement of the earlier spiritual high.

In Psalm 13, after uttering his or her sense of being abandoned by God, the psalmist anticipates that the period of dryness will not endure, and says in verse 6, "I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me."

In the church, this experience of a long spiritual dry spell is sometimes referred to as a "dark night of the soul." That term was coined by a 16th-century Spanish poet and monk called St. John of the Cross. His book, titled *The Dark Night of the Soul*, is an account of the monk's own struggle with spiritual emptiness and absence, despite continuing his devotional efforts.

In dark-night experiences, people generally find traditional prayer extremely difficult and unrewarding for an extended period of time. They may feel as though God has suddenly abandoned them, or that their prayer life has collapsed.

Rather than being a negative event, the dark night is believed by some mystics and others to be a blessing in disguise where the individual is trained to grow from vocal and mental prayer, to a deeper prayer of the soul.

Several of the spiritual giants of the past, including Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Bunyan, John Wesley, St. Teresa (a 16th-century Spanish nun), and, in more recent times, Mother Teresa, have reported experiencing dark-night episodes. St. Teresa spoke of the experience as a "drought" in her spiritual life. Some of these Christians eventually emerged from their dark night, but Mother Teresa privately confessed that she did not, though she carried on in faithfulness to God nonetheless.

Question: What things might you try during a dark-night episode to rekindle your former passion for Christ?

1 Kings 19:9-10

At that place [Elijah] came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (For context, read 19:1-18.)

First Kings 19:1-18 is about the prophet Elijah's spiritual dryness following his successful confrontation with prophets of Baal. Now fleeing for his life from the angry Queen Jezebel, and being exhausted, he comes to the erroneous conclusion that he is the only one left who is faithful to God. God, however, comes to Elijah in his exhaustion not with comfort, but with a message that there were more than 7,000 in Israel who had not bowed to Baal, and a call to get back on his feet and continue doing the Lord's will. And that seems enough to reinvigorate the prophet.

Questions: Thinking of your own sense of the nearness of God to you or his distance from you, how much of that sense do you think is affected by your energy level and/or emotions at any given time? What does that suggest about God's actual proximity to you?

Jeremiah 29:13-14

When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD ... (For context, read 29:1-14.)

John 4:7, 9-11, 13-14

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ... The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" ... Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ... Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (For context, read 4:1-30.)

Both of these passages are about having one's spiritual thirst slaked.

Questions: How should we read these passages in relation to our own spiritual quest? As guarantees? As the ideal? As exceptional cases? As a judgment of us if we don't feel that our spiritual thirst is quenched? In what other realms of life do you have to press on without assurance that you are making the right choice?

2 Corinthian 5:6-7

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord -- for we walk by faith, not by sight. (For context, read 5:1-10.)

Paul's comment here about being "at home in the body" and "away from the Lord" is his way of saying that we cannot have full connection with Christ -- cannot fully see him -- this side of the grave. In the meantime, however, he says that the thing to do is to "walk by faith, not by sight." That suggests that *belief* in Christ, and not the ability to see or experience him, is what is needed to carry on until we see Christ in eternity.

Questions: When have you had to walk by faith alone? Did you find faith sufficient? Explain your answer.

For Further Discussion

1. Mother Teresa, the evidence shows, did not fail in belief or in love, but simply did not have the ongoing assurance of the Holy Spirit after having experienced that Spirit in her early life. If we believe in Christ and love our neighbor, are we a Christian even if we have no "blessed assurance"? Why or why not?
2. Psalm 51:10-12, says "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." This too is an expression of spiritual thirst, but if you read all of Psalm 51, it becomes clear that in this case, the psalmist's dryness was the result of his sin. Thus, the "water" he needed involved divine forgiveness. So the cure for his dryness was God's grace.
Is it possible in some cases, however, that getting one's spiritual dryness relieved is more a matter of psychology than theology, and if so, what are the implications of that? How can we tell when our thirst is because of sin separating us from God and when it is simply a phenomenon of our emotions or personality?
3. Some people who live or have lived in the Western states wait for a change of seasons to signal the end of the worst of the fire season. Do we all have seasons of dryness? What has signaled, for you, the return of spirituality?

4. Respond to this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "One summer in the 90s I hit a spiritual trough where belief seemed impossible, even ridiculous. It was almost like there was a malicious voice repeating every now and then, 'There's nothing out there.' Then when fall rolled around and the corn was high and the sun was setting over an Indiana landscape, I felt like a great burden was lifted. It was like those 40 days in the desert and the temptation that followed for Jesus had ended. Faith was normal and natural. I felt restored. Now I look back and think, 'The fire season was over.'"

5. Discuss this: In his book *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, French Reformed theologian Jacques Ellul writes this: "(H)ope is man's answer to God's silence. ...When God speaks, what possible significance could hope have? The Kingdom of God is here, the resurrection achieved, the eschatology is realized ... Hope comes alive only in the dreary silence of God, in our loneliness before a closed heaven, in our abandonment ... Man is going to express his hope that God's silence is neither basic nor final, nor a cancellation of what we had laid hold of as a Word from God ... When God is silent, he has to be made to talk. When God turns away, he has to be made to turn back to us again. When God seems dead, he has to be made to exist."

Responding to the News

If you are conscious of some spiritual dryness, this is a good time to consider whether that is because of sin separating you from God, is the byproduct of exhaustion or malaise, or is simply the way your personality functions. If because of sin, pray for forgiveness. If because of exhaustion, consider what relief and rest you might be able to add to your daily life. If because of personality function, self-understanding and acceptance might be the right salve.

If you've been experiencing dryness for a while, you might inquire with your pastor about who might be a spiritual director to help them discover God in their own experiences. Or you might look here (<http://www.sdicompanions.org>) to find a spiritual director.

Remember to pray for those in the paths of the fires.

Prayer

O God, help us when we are in spiritual dark nights to not lose our faith, but instead to carry on, loving our neighbors, following Jesus and praising you. Be especially with those suffering from the wildfires. In Jesus' name. Amen.