

Up in Redding, the wildfire known as the Carr fire has devastated over 280 square miles of landscape. It has destroyed over 1000 homes and more than 500 other buildings. It has killed six people. At one time, 38,000 people had been displaced by the fire that seemed never to stop growing. It has been so intense that it creates its own weather system, including a heat tornado with raging winds of up to 140 miles per hour. So far, the fire is only about one-half contained, while some 4,700 firefighters continue the struggle against it.

In the middle of this sits All Saints Episcopal Church, just north of downtown Redding. It was clearly in the mandatory evacuation zone, and for a few tense days it was touch-and-go whether the church would be lost to the fire. In fact, the fire came to within just a few blocks of the church before it changed its direction and headed northwest out of town into less populated areas.

As a matter of interest, our own Fr. Les Westling used to be rector of that church, and in the 1980's he helped design the new church building.

You might know that the Interim Rector of All Saints is our own Rev. Carren Sheldon, daughter of Warren and Carolyn Sheldon. During her assignment there, she has been called to minister to her flock in a time of great peril, heartbreak, and loss.

A couple of weeks ago, early on in the progress of the fire, Bishop Beisner and his staff met with Reverend Carren in Sacramento and asked her what they could do help her and her congregation as the fire continued to consume city and countryside alike.

Carren responded that at this stage of the disaster, all we can do is to “watch, wait, pray, and let God be God.”

“Watch, wait, pray, and let God be God.”

Let's think about that.

We need to watch for God's presence. Some of us feel God's presence in nature, in the great outdoors. Some people say that the design of the universe – from atoms to galaxies – is too perfect to be chance or coincidence. Therein, they say, is the presence of God.

When you see rescuers running toward danger as the rest of us are running away from it, watch there for the presence of God.

At funerals and weddings we wear our emotions close to the surface, and these are often the times when we freely express our love and affection and

appreciation for each other. These are the times when God is there, in our collective grief and joy. If we watch, we can see the presence of God with us.

Some of us see the presence of God in our own lives. We see how lucky we have been, to have avoided serious illness or to have recovered from one. How blessed we are to have the family and friends that we have, and to have the resources that help us to live meaningful lives. We watch this parade of blessings, and we are grateful. It's always good practice to be grateful. In our blessings we find the presence of God.

We need to wait. But we don't have time to wait. We live our lives minute-by-minute and hour-by-hour. We stand in front of the microwave oven and say, "Hurry!" We check our watches and set alarms. We send text messages now because we don't want to wait for some one to answer the phone. And they're not going to answer anyway because they don't have time. Amazon Prime will deliver my order to me tomorrow. Or maybe even today. Our culture has become the most impatient people in the history of civilization. Go almost anywhere these days, and you'll see that almost everybody is busy with their cell phones. It seems we have to be occupied every second of the day. We used to say, "I can't wait" in anticipation of a great event. Now "I can't wait" has become our cultural motto.

Patience is a virtue, but it's also a skill, and we are out of practice.

Psalm 46 tells us to "be still and know that I am God." Time is in no hurry. Evolution of the species continues in its slow but sure pace. Mountains are still being raised up in some places and ground down in others. The Colorado River carves the Grand Canyon a tiny bit deeper every day. Today is not a product; today is a process. Time does not belong to us. When we are still, when we wait, we're not laying plans or making lists. When we are still we are open and ready.

In the stillness – in the waiting – is the presence of God.

I have a friend who says she uses the time spent waiting at a red light to say a prayer. During a busy day driving around town she has plenty of time to pray.

And that brings us to the next task: We must pray.

"Prayer begins where human capacity ends." So said Marian Anderson, the famous African-American singer, who in 1939 was denied permission to sing at Constitution Hall in Washington DC because of her race. At the encouragement of Eleanor Roosevelt, she instead gave a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. She sang "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" There were 75,000 people in attendance that day.

Ms. Anderson was immensely talented, one of the most celebrated singers of her day. (Her music is still available at Amazon dot com.) And yet she acknowledged that her capacity -- for talent, for courage, for compassion -- were limited. And that's where she turned to prayer.

In the Catechism section of our Book of Common Prayer are listed the various kinds of prayer. They are adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession and petition. You will notice that our weekly Prayers of the People contain many of these prayers. We have our corporate prayers, like the collects, Lord's prayer, prayers of the people, among others. These, I think, are good for us, especially if we can manage to feel them deeply even though we've said these words hundreds of times. They bring us together and help bind us as the body of Christ. And the Book of Common Prayer has dozens of prayers to help us put thoughts and words together for almost any occasion.

But prayer is also a very personal thing. Many times throughout the Gospels, Jesus withdrew to a quiet place to pray alone. He needed to have that private conversation with God. Whether we pray for ourselves or for others, we're revealing a private part of ourselves to God. We're being open and ready. In explaining why he prays, C.S. Lewis said, "I don't pray so that I can change God; I pray so that God can change me."

Whatever our prayers, be they for the nation, our loved ones, ourselves or others in trouble or need, or in praise and thanksgiving, we reveal our inner thoughts and feelings. In prayer we don't hide or bluff. We just are. And when we open ourselves unguarded, that is when we open ourselves to change. We watch for the presence of God in our lives, we wait for our inner selves to take us away from the busy world for a while, and we pray. In prayer we make an opening for the presence of God to come nearer to us.

And then there's that last part of what Reverend Carren said: "Let God be God."

It seems we're not very willing to let God be God. It is written that we were created in the image of God. But ever since then we've been re-creating God in our own image.

Today is no different from any other time in the past. There are lots of people who are eager to tell us who God is and what God wants. If we listen closely, we might notice a strange coincidence: according to them, God wants the same things they want. Perhaps we should be cautious of mere mortals who speak of such things as limitless as the mind of God.

The writers of the Christian Bible give us many and different understandings of God. The God of Genesis and Exodus is a different sort of God from the God of the Psalms or the God in the books of the prophets. In the New Testament, Jesus is a new face of God, a God of love and inclusion, mercy and tenderness, service and sacrifice.

Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote, “Si comprehendis non est Deus.” Roughly translated, it means, “If you can understand it, it’s not God.” That’s all very well and good for Saint Augustine to say. He was bishop of North Africa and a prolific writer, philosopher, and theologian in the early Christian church. And then a saint.

We, for the most part, are none of those things. Being unable to comprehend the incomprehensible, unable to know the unknowable, we must reflect on God in ways that have meaning and value to us. Predictably, many of these ways look a lot like ourselves. We re-imagine God to fit our own particular circumstance and interests.

All the different ways of trying to understand the idea that is God, among all of us individually, and as religions and cultures throughout the world, and even since the beginning of humankind – all these different ways are like so many streams and rivers flowing to the same ocean. We are all different, yet all the same in our basic ways.

We all express wonder at the immensity and complexity. We praise for the blessings of life and the people and resources around us. We all recognize our weaknesses and ask for help and protection. We all acknowledge that we have a duty to perform on behalf of that which we call God. We have a duty to our fellow humans and other living creatures and to this planet, our only home. God wants us to do something.

Jesus tells us there are only two things: love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. And then, equal to that duty, love our neighbors as ourselves. Two impossible tasks for us mere humans. That’s why in our baptismal vows we confess that we can do our duty only with God’s help.

The Old Testament prophet Micah asked, “What does the Lord require of you?” Not in many places in Scripture are we told straight out what God requires of us, and this is one of those places.

What does the Lord require of you? To love justice, to show mercy, to walk humbly before your God.

We can't let our neighbor suffer injustice, prejudice, or racism. That which we can't tolerate for ourselves we shouldn't require others to tolerate.

If our neighbors suffer, we must find a way to show mercy. If hungry, we should find food. If lonely, companionship. If homeless, we should find them some shelter. If our neighbors are crazy and drunk and addicted to drugs, we should remember that they are creatures of God, as are we.

Walk humbly before your God. In humility we recognize our many blessings, which we don't deserve and could never earn. Humbly we recognize "not my will but thy will be done."

So:

Watch. We find the presence of God in all things. Wait. In the stillness we may come close to God. Pray. We become open and vulnerable to change.

We are all streams flowing to the same ocean. Let us walk humbly and let God be God.

Amen.