

December 19<sup>th</sup>

Psalm 97:1-7

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As a lifelong Florida resident, I have come to appreciate the critical role of fire in the health of our natural lands. The low crackle of flames cleaning the forest of understory overgrowth is how nature sings in this part of the world. When I read this part of Psalm 97, I take heart that God dwells in thick darkness as flames go before him. God knows that cleansing fire is not to be feared, but to be embraced and employed to give scrub and longleaf pine ecosystems a chance to regenerate. Lightning plays a role in this cycle of growth and cleansing. Even our coastlands, when they remain free from development, are glad when periodic flames visit. The thick darkness of ash on the ground also proclaims God's glory!

When I lead nature hikes, I always talk about how cleansing fire leads to healthy habitats for all of creation. In the past--and sometimes in the present--controlled burns concern people who are unaware of the benefits of regulated fire. But the alternative path of fire suppression leads to eventual wildfires that scream instead of sing. They are signs of an unhealthy ecosystem.

The Christ child came to reset and restore order to our spiritual ecosystem. Without the Messiah, the wildfire of human passion proves to be our undoing. In thick darkness pierced by the flaming light of a single star, God once again lit the way to righteousness and glory. May our mountainous egos melt in recognition of our own need for cleansing.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your regenerating flames. Help us not to fear the clouds and darkness, but trust that you are present within them, as well as in us. Amen.

Action: Research your state's prescribed fire policies and help spread awareness of their benefits, or start with this U.S. Forest Service webpage: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/prescribed-fire>.