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Night on Bald Ridge

Lightning and thunder flashed and rumbled down the mountain into Whitney Valley, but the storm brought no rain.

We spotted the fire on the ridge above the valley through the big south window as we ate supper. I loaded tools into the pickup, drove down the road, and crossed the river and the meadow into the timber.

I carried my shovel and axe, left the pickup and walked up the ridge into dense lodgepole pine. Most of the lodgepole had been killed by pine beetles. About half the dead trees had fallen to the ground or hung up in standing trees. I climbed over and under down trees until I walked out of the thicket into widely-spaced, old-growth ponderosa pine trees and juniper trees.

At the top of the ridge, lightning had ignited two long, pitchy slabs of a dead ponderosa pine tree and thrown them to the ground. They burned furiously; black pitch-smoke boiled violently toward the sky from turbulent flame. Black pitch-smoke boiled from the furiously-burning, still-standing, jagged stump, about nine feet tall. Small pieces of the stump burned in many places across the ground around the stump. Burning pieces could roll down the steep slope into highly-flammable, dead lodgepole, and fire could burn for miles. I dug a fire-line to mineral earth below the fire.

Two men from the Forest Service walked up the ridge. The crew leader said, "It looks like you've pretty well taken care of it." They widened the fire line and turned the burning pieces against the slope so they were less likely to roll, raked all the burning pieces

into one fire. High above us on the mountain, a storm gathered. The radio on the crew leader's belt crackled with lightning-caused static.

The crew leader said, "I think it will be all right here. We're heading down the hill."

I said, "I think a watch ought to be kept on this fire. If the wind comes up, it could blow some of this fire down into the dead lodgepole, and then we'd really have a fire."

Thunder rumbled down the mountain toward us. The crew leader said, "Two weeks ago, lightning struck within forty feet of me and knocked me a hundred feet down the mountain. I'm going to be out in the open in a rubber-tired pickup by the time this storm gets here."

"Okay. I'm the guy who thinks it needs watching, so I'll stay and watch it. Would you stop by my place and tell my wife I'll probably be up here all night?"

They headed down the hill. The day's light faded. Thunder shook the mountain. I put my tools close to the fire, so I could find them when it got dark.

Wind started and kept increasing. I watched the lights of the Forest Service pickup cross the meadow. Clouds brought the storm down the mountain and deepened the new darkness. I walked around the fire. Sparks blew, and fire caught in a rotten log below the fire-line. I broke the log up with my axe and threw the pieces into the fire.

Lightning lighted up the ridge as bright as day. Lightning came so close together, all around me, I could see everything, tall ponderosa pine trees up the ridge from me, bushier juniper trees here and there in the open ground, dry grass, rocks in the soil, the

valley below me.

Heavy rain poured into hard wind and immediately soaked me. The roaring of thunder penetrated me, shook and reverberated through my bones.

I stood partly out of the wind behind the ponderosa pine that leaned almost over the burning stump. It had grown at a twenty degree angle from the ground. I wondered if that made it more likely to uproot and fall in the savage wind. Maybe it grew that way because it had adapted to 400 years of wind blowing down the mountain. It was the tallest tree for some distance. Lightning could strike it.

I was afraid. I was excited.

I thought the heavy rain had ended fire danger, but I had no way to walk out of the storm, because lightning all around me seemed safer than going among dead trees in a high wind. Not necessarily safer, but if I was going to die on the ridge in the storm and lightning struck me, I would probably die instantly, but if I was crushed under a falling tree, dying could drag out for a long and lonely time.

Every night, I read the Bible to our daughters. Our readings came to me in the storm. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me."

I sang prayers into the sound of wind, thunder, and furiously driving rain. "Make a joyous noise unto the Lord," I thought and did.

Most fear left me, replaced by joy in the power and beauty of natural forces around me, the power and beauty of all God's creation. I felt a part of the earth, the ridge, and the storm.

Lightning flashed into the meadow and moved away east, across

the valley and above Huckleberry mountain.

Neither wind nor rain abated. The leaning pine tree didn't give me much shelter. Occasionally, I stepped out of its protection and walked up and down the ridge. I leaned twenty degrees into the wind. Rain poured down so heavily, it put out the fire, even in the very pitchy stump.

With the fire out, I had no reason to stay, but I still wouldn't walk through dead lodgepole in strong wind. I cultivated patience. I felt cold, but not dangerously cold. I walked back and forth along the ridge to keep from getting colder.

Lightning and thunder moved far to the east. Rain stopped. Wind died. It was time to go. It was also very dark under dark clouds close to the mountain. I left my axe and swung my shovel ahead of me like a blind man's cane as I started down the hill, going by feel.

I ran up against down trees and climbed over them, feeling for the ground with my feet. I stooped and felt the darkness with my hands to see if I could go under some of the higher blown-down trees. I kept one hand in front of my face when I moved forward, to avoid a limb in the eye.

A large piece of eternity passed in the black night before I finally reached level ground.

I saw the ridges across the valley, silhouetted against the lighter sky. I saw the upper parts of trees around me against the sky, but I couldn't see anything at all down where I was.

I thought I could stumble into the pickup before I saw it in front of me. I hoped I would. I moved a slow step at a time. Sometime, I would have to give up and head for home on foot. Getting there would take a while.

Lightning flashed on the horizon, and I saw the pickup, fifteen

feet in front of me. It was a beat up old truck, but right then, it was the best in the world.

I drove across the meadow and up the county road home, built a small fire in the kitchen stove, warmed up, and changed out of my wet clothes. My wife and daughters slept.

Later, Laura told me she had been worried as the storm increased. She could do nothing but pray for my safety and know God took care of me. At peace with that realization, she went to bed and went to sleep.

It was almost three o'clock. I ate fruit and cheese and went to bed. I offered a prayer of gratitude for my life and for the experience I had just had, and I drifted easily into sleep.