

Sermon for Pentecost C
Sunday, May 15, 2016
“On Fire for God through the Holy Spirit”

Text: Acts 2:1-11

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every year when I hear the Pentecost story from the reading from the Acts of the Apostles and I think about that miraculous event, I am struck with awe by what an incredible moment that must have been when the Holy Spirit descended upon the heads of the first apostles. First of all, the day was already full of excitement and vitality. Jerusalem was bustling with activity, because, you see, Jews from all over the known world were in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks, *Shavuot* in Hebrew, *Pentekoste* in Greek, that occurred fifty days after the Festival of the Passover. It was a festival that celebrated the giving of the Torah, the law or commandments, to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Then, “suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Who were ‘they’? In the first chapter of Acts, it says that Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James, Matthias, Mary the mother of Jesus, his brothers, and certain other women were sitting in the upper room and devoting themselves to prayer. So, this group of folks, plus some others received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues. I don’t know if you’ve ever experienced people speaking in tongues. It is a regular occurrence in Pentecostal churches where it is believed that individuals are given the gift of speaking in tongues and I’ve experienced that moment in these churches where there is a buzz of people speaking in a language that is unintelligible to other persons in the room. Sometimes on Pentecost Sunday we try to recreate that moment by doing the readings in other languages. But, the moment of the descent of the Holy Spirit was unique. It’s not that people were hearing a cacophony of foreign languages that they couldn’t understand, but rather people were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in their native languages, but what each person *heard* was in their own language. Everyone was rejoicing in the glory of God at that moment.

Now there are two things I would like to point out that made this Pentecost different from Pentecosts before—I mean things *other* than the fact that the Holy Spirit descended upon the followers of Jesus Christ. The first is this particular Pentecost was the fulfillment of the commandments. Pentecost was for the Jews a celebration of the giving of the commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but this Pentecost fulfilled the new commandment given by Jesus Christ, to love one another. The second thing that made this Pentecost different from other Pentecosts before is that the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus was a baptism literally by fire which gave them the fuel to accomplish another of Christ's commandments: to go into all the world and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not only that, the fire of God that appeared to Moses gave the commandments while he looked on and then carried the message to his people; at this Pentecost, the fire of God was given to each one of the apostles and followers, transforming them from mere spectators into active participants. This Pentecost wasn't just a festival of celebration, it was the launch of a new movement in the world. It was the beginning of what our Presiding Bishop likes to call "The Jesus Movement." The Holy Spirit was the Advocate that Jesus had promised to his followers who would be their comfort, but also their guide to teach them everything they needed to know and remind them of everything Jesus had said to them. The Holy Spirit was sent to walk alongside Christ's followers and give them strength to accomplish the charge that he had given to them. The Holy Spirit was the fire that would invigorate the followers of Jesus the Christ to proclaim the good news. That unique Pentecost day, set a new group of folks on fire for Christ, on fire for God.

Fire. We read and speak about tongues of fire in the Pentecost story. The Church represents fire in the liturgical color today. Fire is central to what Pentecost is all about. Even before Christians came along, Pentecost was about fire—the fire of the burning bush; the fire of God that intersects human history and interrupts human lives. Moses wasn't expecting to meet God in a fire, but that's how God got his attention. Fire does many things: it gives warmth, it conveys energy, it provides light, but fire also scorches, it consumes, it loosens, it breaks down, it destroys, it refines, it purifies, it regenerates, it reinvigorates, it prepares for new growth, and it transforms. The fire of Pentecost is meant

to do all of those things to us, for us, and with us. The fire of Pentecost is meant to shake things up and to transform. Pentecost transformed those first disciples and apostles, and Pentecost will transform us.

We need transformation. Each and every one of us needs transformation, the kind of transformation that only the fire of the Holy Spirit can actualize. Lately, there have been a few things that have bothered me about our life together in our Christian community. There seems to be an increasing level of discord, disharmony, and disunity among us. People are talking about each other, and not in a good way. Members of ministries are not working together. The leadership is not working together. Bad sentiments keep brewing and tensions keep rising. It bothers me when I hear that anyone among us has come here and leaves unfulfilled, unenergized, and untransformed. It is unacceptable that anyone should feel worse when they leave than when they arrived, but that I'm afraid, has been happening way too much around here, but today is Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit is descending on this place with holy fire to renew and to transform.

This is God's house and it is a house of prayer for all people. It is a refuge from the ways of the world. It is a place for comfort, it is a place for solace, it is a place for calm in the midst of the chaotic frenzy out there. It is a place of quiet. It is a glimpse of heaven. Too many of our problems are being brought inside. Too much of our drama is coming in with us and it is destroying our Christian community. Pentecost is about the fulfillment of Christ's commandment to love one another and about being the people of God to each other and to the world. At Pentecost, the commission of the early apostles was activated and set in motion. And so, this Pentecost, I charge you, All Saints. Whatever drama you got going on needs to be left outside. Whatever issues you have with someone else needs to be left outside. Whatever bad mood or attitude you're in when you get here, leave it outside. Because inside these walls is where the Holy Spirit dwells and God is to be found. That's what happens within these walls. On this day of Pentecost, I charge you, All Saints, to keep this place as God's house of prayer and reverence. Each of the doors to the sanctuary has a sign on it that says that the Blessed Sacrament, the Real Presence of Christ, is reserved here and to maintain the reverence of this space. That means that when we enter, we enter quietly, because at any given time, someone

might be praying here. That means that we don't hold conversations with each other from across the room; if you need to say something to someone else, go up to them and discuss it quietly. That means that we work together as a family, as a team, as a community. That means that we do not talk about each other or cut each other down or make any one of us feel less than God's beloved child. We are a Christian community; the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans that we did not read today reminds us that in receiving the spirit we have received a spirit of adoption making us children of God and heirs of God with Christ. We are a Christian community made up of many people from many places from many families from many walks of life from many journeys in our lives. Each and every one of us has past and present realities in our lives, and none of us is perfect. Neither were any of the first apostles at Pentecost; they were all imperfect human beings just as we are, yet they were each given the fire of the Holy Spirit to do the work of the Spirit. We come here because God meets us here wherever we are in our lives and moves us, inspires us and transforms us. If you can't make that happen, if you can't leave your drama outside, if you can't love everyone when you come inside, if you can't maintain the reverence of this space in which Christ is constantly present, then don't come in. Go back home or go somewhere else. This is to be a safe space where God meets us where we are, where we can feel safe, comforted, loved, refreshed, renewed, and transformed. And more importantly, we should be reinvigorated to do the work of the Spirit when we leave, because the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in this place and does all those things that fire can do. And let me be quite clear: what I have just said is not, I repeat, is not directed at any particular individual, present or absent; it is a message to all of us here in our Christian community. If however, something I've said resonated with you personally, in the spirit of Pentecost, I shall leave it to the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit as to how you heard it and should respond.

Tomorrow evening, the vestry, wardens, and I will begin conversations with the help of someone from the Episcopal Church Foundation, to help us clarify our identity as a Christian community and to start us on the path to bring clarity to our shared mission and vision. This is important work and is a necessary first step in order for us to do the work that we are called to do in this community. I and two members of

the vestry have been participating in a program through the Diocese for congregational development. Through that program, we are to work on a project within our various worship communities, and the project we are working on will focus improving communication and deepening trust among us. Over the next several months, and beyond, you will be involved in that important work to help transform All Saints into a place that will continue to transform lives and do it better and more effectively. This summer, we will also have one or two opportunities to do a walkabout around this community, so that we can see, interact, and get to know the Woodhaven community in which we live and which we serve. And we will begin informing you of community meetings and events, so that we can be a part of it and know what's going on in the lives of the people who live here in Woodhaven. The fire of Pentecost charges us up and energizes us to make a greater impact in this community, our community, and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Comforter, will walk along side us in those and all of our endeavors.

Fire. It gives warmth, it conveys energy, it provides light, it scorches, it consumes, it loosens, it breaks down, it destroys, it refines, it purifies, it regenerates, it reinvigorates, it prepares for new growth, and it transforms. The fire of Pentecost is meant to do all of those things to us, for us, and with us. The fire of Pentecost is meant to transform. Pentecost transformed those first disciples and apostles, and Pentecost will transform us. Let us now be on fire for God, on fire for Jesus Christ, on fire for All Saints, on fire for Woodhaven, on fire for ourselves, because the fiery love of God, manifested in Jesus Christ, and stoked by the Holy Spirit burns hot within us. Amen.

Resources

Art and Faith Matter/s,
<http://artandfaithmatters.blogspot.com/2016/05/-fire-Pentecost-art-lectionary.html>

David Lose in *...in the Meantime,*
<http://www.davidlose.net/2015/05/pentecost-b-come-alongside-holy-spirit/>