

Day of Pentecost (Year A)

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And 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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*"In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

Ashes are motionless. Earthy and yet dead. Ashes are remnants of that which before had life. They have no direction, no purpose. In my experience at least, ashes have no real use with one notable exception. Ashes are incredibly useful on a particular Wednesday evening every year when I get the privilege of smearing them on your foreheads! We gather to remind ourselves that we are dust and to dust we shall return. The ashes upon our foreheads remind us that God is immortal and we are not. The dead remains of that which was living are smeared on our foreheads to remind us of how fragile we are and how much we need God and God's relentless grace. But, if that were the only practice that we had as

a Christian community, we would have to admit that that would be downright depressing. In fact, I imagine that is why our Ash Wednesday service is far from being our most attended service throughout the calendar year. But I imagine that its popularity might increase if each person who donned that ashen cross remembered this fact:

We begin the season of Lent every year with ashes on our foreheads.

We end the season of Easter every year with flames above them.

So the next time you find ashes being smeared on your forehead and are tempted to give in to despair, remember that the ashes are only one chapter in a larger narrative with flame on the horizon. Remember that God is found in the fire and that flammable Spirit of God has been promised to us.

Yes, God is definitely found in the fire. In fact, when fire shows up in large quantities in the Bible, it's a pretty good indicator that God is on the move and doing something big! Think of a big burning bush that caught the eye of Moses and started off the epic drama of the book of Exodus! Think of the big pillar of fire that led the Israelites in the wilderness!

You see, that flammable Holy Spirit had been promised to the disciples. That same Spirit that burned that bush and that same Spirit that burned bright in the horizon to give the Israelites direction had been promised to the disciples who sat in that upper room at Pentecost. In the Gospels, John the Baptist had promised that Christ, "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." And just last week, we celebrated the Ascension of Jesus and remembered his promise to us when he said "I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Yes, that fiery Spirit descended upon the disciples and God was, yet again, on the move in a bright, consuming fire!

When you think of it, fire is a very appropriate symbol for God. Like God, fire holds within it both the capability of being utterly destructive as well as being completely necessary for sustaining life. This complex relationship reminds us of the complexity of the nature of God. Fire is what burned this building to the ground in the 1930's. Fire is also what heats the water that flows through the pipes to keep this building warm during brutal winters. And though we do our best to harness the power of fire and use it under controlled circumstances for our health and wellbeing, there are undoubtedly times when it gets out of control and goes wild. If that weren't true, we wouldn't have a fire department on this island!

But there appears to have been no need for a fire department on that Pentecost day that we are remembering and experiencing today. The text tells us that the Spirit of God came upon the disciples and, though I'm sure the people were nevertheless startled, it soon became clear that the purpose of the Spirit's fire was not destructive but rather creative.

The text tells us that there were people there from all over the area. Many dialects sitting in one room. And all the sudden, this mysterious Spirited flamed settled upon each person's head and suddenly they could understand one another. Language, that largest barrier between people of different cultures, was no longer dividing.

You know, it's interesting that if you take today's story and press the rewind button, you get a glimpse of another story in the bible. Think about it: today's story begins with people unable to understand one another's language, then God does something, and then they all understand one another's

languages. The reverse sounds something like this: everyone understands one another, then God does something, and then all of the sudden they can't understand one another. Sound familiar? If it does, it's because the story of Pentecost is the exact opposite of the story of the Tower of Babel. In that Old Testament story, the people - all united in common language - decide to build a tower to reach the height of God. God doesn't like this idea and causes them all to speak different languages to inhibit their ability to collaborate and succeed in their quest. Pentecost is the exact opposite. Pentecost is like God reversing the Tower of Babel and - instead of dividing people - bringing people together for a common purpose.

This is why we often speak of Pentecost as the birthday of the Church. Not church with a little "c" but *the* Church with a big "C." Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. Pentecost is the continuation of the promise Jesus made to us as he ascended to heaven that the Spirit of God would come to us and unite us and send us forward. Pentecost is the day that we celebrate the Spirit, those tongues of fire, that is both unpredictable and inescapably present in our lives as Christian communities.

However, we sometimes have a tendency to diminish the celebration of Pentecost to a mere observation of nostalgia. If we are not careful, the story of Pentecost can turn into some event "back in the good 'ole days" when the Church was growing instead of declining. If we do not take care, we can find ourselves believing that the Spirit was present then more than she is now. And this simply is not true. We sometimes find ourselves tempted to compare what the Church looks like today to what the Church looked like then and such comparisons might very well leave us wanting for a more "authentic" Christianity. However, Kristin Saldine who teaches preaching at Austin Seminary, reminds us that "such comparisons are unnecessary. The story of Pentecost," she writes, "is not meant to be a benchmark of what the church should look like on any given Sunday. Rather, it seeks to communicate how important the church is and how inseparable it is from Christ...Every year, on the Day of Pentecost, we are reminded of who we are as a church, what we proclaim, and the source of that proclamation. It is a message to the church from the church, passed down through millennia to each generation."¹

Saldine makes an excellent point and I believe it is this: Pentecost reminds us of who we are not by demanding that we return to who we were but rather by directing us to what the Holy Spirit is calling us to become.

Pentecost has a funny way of reminding us of what we should be focusing on. You see, somewhere along the way on the two-thousand years of Christianity, we got a little too comfortable. We got a little too distracted. I don't know if it was the increasing maintenance of aging church buildings or the baby boomers building institutions that their children don't want to maintain or the Church's tendency toward giving into the consumerist mentality of modern American society. I don't know what it was but somewhere along the way many of us Christians - especially those of us in the North American context - forget the basics. We forgot, as Saldine puts it, that "Pentecost sums up the gospel with simplicity and audacity: Jesus Christ offers salvation to all, and the church exists to proclaim it."

Pentecost was the church's literal baptism by fire which ordained us to "go to the ends of the earth." If you are curious as to how the early church did that, I would encourage you to read the Book of Acts for two reasons. First of all, the Book of Acts is nothing but a record of the early church and, secondly, we will be spending a good bit of time in the book of Acts in the month of June. The Book of Acts reminds us of our roots and encourages us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to be open to the movement of God in our lives. Most importantly, the Book of Acts has many characters but the most

¹Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting On the Word*. 12 vols. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008-2011.

important two are the Holy Spirit and the Church universal. Pentecost reminds us that that relationship between us and the Holy Spirit is as powerful today as it was those many years ago. It may look different. It may feel different. But make no mistake about it: the Spirit is on the loose and at work in our lives no less than she was in that room on Pentecost! There is absolutely nothing we can do to quell the power of the Spirit - absolutely nothing! What we can do, however, is to open ourselves to the Spirit's work in our lives. What we can do is place our trust not on ourselves or our ability to achieve "success" or "prominence" or "stability" or "size" but rather to trust the Spirit that binds us together to spread the message that Christ is risen and that very same Risen Christ offers salvation to all!

Come, Holy Spirit! Wa, wa, wa emimimo! Wa, wa, wa alagbara! Wa-o, wa-o, wa-o! Come right now! For we, your servants, are ready to work!

Friends, happy Pentecost! Happy birthday!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and that wild, wild, Holy Spirit. Amen.