

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

¹ When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² 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. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ '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.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness,
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

In a small town, the volunteer fire department's telephone was answered by the policeman on duty, who would in turn sound the fire whistle to rally the volunteers to duty. One Saturday morning, the town chief of police, had just come on duty when the fire department phone rang. He picked up the phone and said, "Fire Department." A voice on the other end of the line frantically said, "Send the fire truck!" Then the caller immediately slammed the phone down.

The police chief stood stunned, not knowing what to do. In a few minutes, the phone rang again. Quickly he picked it up and said again, "Fire Department!" Again, the voice cried, "Send the fire truck!" Again, the caller immediately hung up.

Realizing that someone's house was possibly at stake, he rushed outside and scanned the sky to see if he could see smoke and, therefore, send the fire trucks in that direction. While outside, he also devised a plan as to how to keep the caller from hanging up so quickly if she called back. Sure enough the phone rang again, and he went running inside. Picking up the phone he quickly asked, "Where's the fire?" The lady on the other end screamed, "In the kitchen," and slammed the phone down again.

Fire is one of the images put before us in the story of Pentecost. It's the image of fire that I would like us to zero-in on for this year's celebration of Pentecost.

In the following passage, Frederick Buechner describes Fire from his writing, *Beyond Words*:

"Fire has no shape or substance. You can't taste it or smell it or hear it. You can't touch it except at great risk. You can't weigh it or measure it or examine it with instruments. You can never grasp it in its fullness because it never stands still. Yet there is no mistaking its extraordinary power.

The fire that sweeps through miles of forest like a terrible wind and the flickering candle that lights the old woman's way to bed. The burning logs on the subzero night that save the pipes from freezing and give summer dreams to the tabby dozing on the hearth. Even from millions of miles away, the conflagration of the sun that can turn green earth into desert and strike blind any who fail to lower their gaze before it. The power of fire to devastate and consume utterly. The power of fire to purify by leaving nothing in its wake but a scattering of ash that the wind blows away like mist.

A pillar of fire was what led the children of Israel through the wilderness, and it was from a burning bush that God first spoke to Moses. There were tongues of fire leaping up from the disciples on the day of Pentecost. In John's apocalypse it is a lake of fire that the damned are cast into, and Faithful and True himself, he says, has eyes of fire as he sits astride his white horse.

In the pages of Scripture, fire is holiness, and perhaps never more hauntingly than in the little charcoal fire that Jesus of Nazareth, newly risen from the dead, kindles for cooking his friends' breakfast on the beach at daybreak."

That little story about Jesus' appearance after the resurrection to his disciples while they were fishing is found in John 21:1-14. We read there that the disciples were not having much luck catching any fish. Then Jesus shows up on the shoreline, although they did not recognize him, and he tells them to cast their nets out on the other side of the boat, and low and behold, their nets were suddenly full of fish. That's when they begin to realize it was Jesus giving the fishing advice from the shoreline.

They join Jesus on the beach where he already has a fire burning. He instructs the disciples to get some of the fish and cook it for their breakfast meal together. The fire cooked the fish...which they all ate...even Jesus ate...proving that he truly was alive—not a hallucination or a ghost. Jesus was really alive!

Verse 4 in the *Message's* translation of today's text, it says, "Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them." Fire once again provides fuel for revealing the living

presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit, and this time the Living Holy Spirit filled the disciples.

If we go back to the Gospel of Luke, we read these words spoken by John the Baptist announcing the baptism of the Holy Spirit: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." And the words Peter quoted from the prophet Joel, use the imagery of fire to communicate some kind of revelation.

Okay, so the symbolism of fire at Pentecost communicates something exciting was happening; it communicates the holiness of the moment, and it announces the Good News of a Living Spirit—the Living Christ that dwells in us when we, like the disciples, are open to the Spirit's living in us. But let us not forget another function of fire. It burns. Let's explore that, beginning with this story.

A few years ago, my husband, Don, and I were on one of several motorcycle trips down the Skyline Drive in Virginia. We spent a few days riding the winding road. All along the road we saw beautiful green plants. We stopped at overlooks to view the green mountains that seemed to go on endlessly. There were a few places, however, where we noticed burnt tree trunks standing amidst young green plants. Obviously, these were areas changed by a forest fire.

It was in one way a sad sight to see; but at the same time, it was beautiful because the ground was covered with new green life. These plants never would have had the chance to grow because larger trees blocked the sun needed for them to grow from reaching them.

Not every forest fire is started by someone's negligence or by some twisted arsonist's desire to watch a huge fire burn. Most forest fires are started by lightning. These fires are not necessarily a bad thing. They actually are somewhat like nature's way of cleaning things up and allowing the earth to rejuvenate an area with much needed new life.

This is a similar concept behind the meaning of the "tongues of fire" that we read about in today's text. Tongues symbolize speech and the communication of the gospel. Fire can also symbolize God's purifying presence, which burns away the undesirable elements of our lives and sets our hearts aflame to ignite the lives of others. And, fire spreads, which symbolizes that God's presence is available to all who believe in God. Choosing to be a believer and follower of Jesus opens our hearts and soul to the beneficial fire of the Holy Spirit in us.

On the other hand, we all know that fire can be destructive. When my husband served at a church workcamp in Honduras, he observed many dead looking fields—acres and acres of land on the mountainsides where he was working. He found out that this land was fertile at one time. They were fields for the local farmers' crops.

The fields were on the steep mountainsides and the farmers did not have access to modern farming equipment. So, after the harvest, instead of turning over the soil in their fields, they burned their fields. After years of doing that, nothing would grow on that land because the soil was destroyed. Adding to their problems without growing plants, there was nothing to hold the ground in place; so, when the rainy season came, the ground would just slide down the mountainside.

In our society today, there is a raging fire of evil, destroying people's lives. Burning their souls with anger, hatred selfishness and greed to the point of making their spirits barren and empty and unable to cultivate love and hope—burning the bridges connecting them to meaningful and nurturing healthy relationships. Worst of all, they are burning the bridges that could connect them to God. This wildfire leads to no good. In fact, it threatens to destroy the church as it consumes more and more lost and discouraged souls.

We cannot let this happen. God, in fact, won't let it happen. With or without us, God wins in the end; and that's what scripture teaches us through Christ's resurrection and through prophecy. I don't know about you, but I want to be on the winning team. I want to be on the side that promotes and spreads love, justice, peace, joy and hope for all people; not the side that tears down all that is good and promising for people and for creation.

The church needs to be on the winning team. What Spirit-filled Christians need to be doing is allowing the positive fire of the Holy Spirit to burn inside of us. We need to allow the wind of the Holy Spirit to blow on the fire in us, carrying us to the places and opportunities that will allow the Spirit to change the lives of those who are caught up in the destructive fires that consume them and separate them from the greatest love known to humankind, and throw them into eternal darkness.

The Sunday School class I teach on Wednesday nights over Zoom has been learning about missional ministry as we've been reading Leonard Sweet's book, "So Beautiful." This past week we discussed the topic of storytelling. We asked ourselves, what do our personal stories reveal about our relationship with God? We considered how our stories might impact others if we told them our stories. We thought about how our daily living is actually a revealing story of our relationship with God.

We also considered how the same concept is true for the church. We have a story to tell about our journey together and the Holy Spirit's role in that journey. Our life together, our worship and the ministries we do together tell a story about the Spirit's movement through us; and ultimately our living story reveals to others a lot about our connection with God. For example, one of our stories from our past—the community Christmas dinner—reveals compassion and love for the less fortunate in our community. Surely the Spirit was at work through us.

What will our living stories in the days to come reveal about our relationship to God? Will we allow the fullness of the Spirit to live through us to reach out to others, to share Jesus with them? Bible School? Workcamp? Fall festival? Sunday School? Children and Youth programs?

Oh yes, God wins in the end, and we can make the choice—or not—to be on the winning team. We can choose to allow the all-consuming powerful fire of the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts; and we can welcome the winds of the Living Spirit of Christ to blow upon us so that the Holy Spirit, and all the good things that come with it and through us will have the opportunity to spread like a good wildfire into the lives of everyone we meet, getting rid of the destructive forces of evil and replacing it with God's Kingdom. May it be so in us individually and as God's united and beloved church body. Amen.