

As a Flame

Pentecost, Year C - Acts 2:1-11

*based on a sermon preached at Holy Trinity, Fayetteville, Pentecost 1995
preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, May 24, 2015*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The day of Pentecost is an ancient holiday, celebrated by the Jews long before Christ. But something peculiar happened on that first Pentecost after Christ's death and resurrection. As they had begun to do, as they had been *commanded* to do, Jesus's followers had gathered once again for prayer. Those who had traveled the dusty roads with Jesus, those who had heard him speak, those who had seen him perform signs and work miracles, those who had been there when he was crucified and had seen the nail prints and spear wound in his resurrected body – they were all gathered to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost in the new way that their master had taught them, they had gathered to eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of the one that had taught them what love really was.

When all of a sudden, something happened. The place where they were meeting was filled with a tremendous sound. The author of Acts says that it was like the sound of a violent wind. *We* might say it sounded just like a freight train. Then fiery tongues came and lit on the head of everyone present, a marvelous sign of something even *more* marvelous that was happening. Because there and then, the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus Christ, and the Church was born.

The story goes on, of course, to talk about people from all over the world hearing the Good News in the language each could understand. Then the story continues through the rest of the book of Acts and through the rest of the New Testament, as the Church, and the Good News, and the Holy Spirit spread wider and wider, until it has reached the entire *world*. But the whole story hinges on this one moment, the whole story really comes back to the fire.

In Scripture there are several names, several representations, several *symbols* for the Holy Spirit. At Jesus's baptism, of course, the Spirit descended as a dove. In much of the Old Testament, the Spirit is the Wisdom of God. And in the creation story, moving over the face of the deep, the Spirit is the breath of God. But when it comes to *this* day, the Feast of Pentecost, the birth of the Church, whole story really comes back to the fire. We remember that fire even in the red of this one day, joyous and festive and *alive*. The fire and flame become for us the warmth of God's breath, the comforting glow of the Advocate Jesus promised to those that waited.

In our world, we have become very comfortable with fire. We live in a world where, with few exceptions, fire is absolutely controlled. We sip cool wine sitting next to a roaring fire in a fireplace and call it the height of luxury, maybe turned on as simply as a gas line and the twist of a knob. We encase fire and with the flip of a switch, or even automatically, we fan its warmth throughout our homes. We even bottle fire in bulbs and diodes and pixels, and bring light to the darkness. For us, fire is a tame phenomenon.

But that sort of comfortable, quiet view of fire is *not* what the writer of Acts had in mind at all. The followers of Jesus were gathered together in prayer, Acts tells us, when the sound of a *violent* wind filled the place, when fire from heaven descended on every person present. For them, fire was anything *but* a comfort. This was not the ancient equivalent of a light bulb coming on over someone's head when they get a good idea. This was not the controlled, tame, *sanitized* flame with which we are so comfortable. The fire that came with the violent rushing wind was the driven, rushing, *living* fire that was completely beyond the control of those that had gathered to wait for Jesus's promise. This flame was not something

which the disciples were looking for. This flame was not what they had bargained for. This flame was not what they would have even *wished* for. They were waiting for a comforter. They were waiting for an Advocate. They were waiting for a companion until the Lord's return. What they got *instead* was a fire that burned *away* their comfort, a fire that set their hearts ablaze with the need to spread the Good News of Christ, a fire that drove them regardless of the cost, regardless of the pain, regardless of the loss. People were uprooted from their homes because of this fire. People were imprisoned, bound in shackles and tortured because of this fire. People lost their very lives because of this fire.

It was not a comfortable fire, to be sure. But it was a fire that was alive and that brought life to those that it touched. It was a fire that consumed those that accepted it and forged them anew in its own image. Through the centuries that have passed since that first Pentecost of the Church, the fire has burned brightly in the hearts of men and women of faith. Though some have tried, it is not a fire that can be ignited or extinguished or controlled by human activity. Rather, it is the fire that is from God alone, the fire that is alive and moves as it wills. It shows up in places where it is least expected, like that room where the followers of Christ were met that day. And when it does it changes *everything*.

You know, there are those that think that I exist only for these few hours up here every Sunday morning. But as I go about my work here in the Parish day by day, I often get to see things most of you don't. And I often get to see the fire of the Holy Spirit alive and well here on the corner of Green and Center. The fire is here in the exuberant laughter and near constant motion of Rebecca and William, and behind the quieter, knowing smile of Barbara and Joan and Brod. The fire is here in Monessa's stories in the Atrium, and in Raiko and Michelle's work with the little ones of Vacation Bible School, and in Leslie's companionship with the EYC, and in the study of the (ahem) *older* folks in EfM, and in the prayers of our new Daughters of the King. The fire is here in Sunday morning breakfasts, and Tuesday evening dinners at Rookie's, in bar-b-ques and picnics and Wednesday evening suppers, even in the chitterlings. The fire is on the road to the hospital, and on the road to meetings at the Diocese, and on the road carrying kids back and forth, and back and forth, and back and forth to All Saints Center. The fire is here in the hundreds and hundreds of gifts given to each other that we don't even have to think about, the beautiful flowers, and the carefully folded linens at the Altar, the carefully ordered flow of our liturgy kept moving by acolytes as young as eight years old. And the fire is here in Bill and Carolyn's boxes at Christmastime, and in the Purdy's boxes here for soldiers we may never see, and in Retia's shawls, and in Charlie's crosses and flags, and in the thousand ways we reach out with the love of Christ to our community and to the world. The fire is here every time the community is together praying, worshipping, celebrating the one who through his death and resurrection struck the spark that lit the whole world aflame.

It is the same fire that descended on the infant Church that lights up the hearts of the people of St. Paul's, the same fire that lights up *your* heart, and yours, and yours. To be sure we cannot control it. The fire is *alive*, and moves where it wills. But neither can it be quenched. My prayer this morning is the same as it has always been: that we will recognize that flame for what it is, that we will embrace the fire of the Holy Spirit among us, that we will be *consumed* by it. And in the process, that we will let that fire, that holy flame continue to transform and renew and enliven this place for the work that our Lord Jesus Christ has given us to do.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!