

The Feast of Pentecost
Saint Dustan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
Acts 2:1-21

28 May 2023

I love fire as a reality and as a symbol. As a reality, fire can be terrifying, threatening, menacing, devastating, dangerous. For farmers, however, fire is absolutely necessary for the clearing of lands in preparation for planting. I remember as a child the many proscribed fires that cleared the land, burning away debris accumulated for centuries, the roots of trees that had once been cut, but whose roots had not been removed, and clearing the ground from dead carcasses, and wild grass that was simply unable to support a harvest. After these fires, you saw the workers tilling the ground patiently, turning over the fertile soil, making it ready for planting. Then you saw the planting, and if you were patient, you were treated to a beautiful symphony of colors, as the first green shoots broke from the once dense and arid soil, followed by leaves, stalks, flowers, and then beautiful fruits and vegetables, or field grass able to support life and produce bountiful harvests.

Today is Pentecost Sunday and I would like to use several images to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But first, let me set the context. It has been fifty days since Jesus' resurrection and the disciples are back in Jerusalem, together with some of the women, to celebrate the feast of booths. Sukkot (Booths) recalls the journey from Egypt to Canaan when the people lived in tents or booths (Leviticus 23:33-43.) In a more general sense, the festival, always celebrated at the end of the agricultural year when the grapes and olives were harvested in the land, celebrates God's grace during the entire agricultural year. God provided for his people through various harvests, and Sukkot gives thanks to God for all of them and prays to God to send plentiful rains for the next year's crops. There is always a festival atmosphere throughout the land, and many visitors return home on this feast day to celebrate God's blessings at family meals and cultic worship. The Temple would have been busy and the city would have been filled with people from all over the known world of the day. The disciples are here as well.

Luke tells us in Acts today that the disciples were all gathered in one place. This could be the same home at which they celebrated the Last Supper. We know that at this point in history, Jesus' friends spent a lot of time in prayer, shared all common goods, and spent time in the Temple every day. Jesus had asked them to remain in the city until he sent them another advocate from the Father, but of course Jesus had not said when this would be. So the small family of friends are gathered together visiting, when suddenly a sound like "the rush of a violent wind" filled the entire house. Those who know Scripture will remember the narrative of Ezekiel 37. God asks the prophet to preach to decaying bones and suddenly a wind comes from the four corners and covers the entire scene, entering those decaying bones and giving them new life. I think Luke wants us to think

about Ezekiel today. The promised gift from the Father is finally here, and the disciples will never be the same again.

Then “divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,” not just filling the space with brightness, but resting in each of them individually as well. And here, I would like to think about those proscribed fires of my childhood. I imagine that powerful light from the spirit burning away any debris of cowardice and fear. They have been hiding from the authorities since the death of Jesus, filled with fear of the authorities, trying to avoid the fate that befell their beloved friends. I imagine that fire burning away any doubts in their minds and hearts about who Jesus really was and what their entire time with him meant. I imagine that fire burning away any disillusionment with the Jesus story, any grief over their friend, Jesus, whom they saw ascend to the heavens, and any desire to go back to a safe and predictable life as a fishermen, farmers, or tax collectors. I can imagine the Holy Spirit burning away all pretense, all prejudice against the Gentiles, all illusion that the Law might save them, all confusion about the place of Israel in the Salvation History God had begun to unfold from the beginning of creation. I imagine the Holy Spirit burning with passion in their hearts and allowing scales to fall from their eyes, so that they may now perceive the truths Jesus had been trying to teach them.

And as the scales fell, and the Spirit burned its unquenchable fire in their minds and hearts, “they began to speak in other languages.” At that point, their very local story became an international story for the benefit of the whole world. Then filled with power the disciples began to preach to all righteous Jews from all around the known world of the day, to the point that everyone heard them in their own language. This highly stylized narrative speaks of a known reality. By the time Acts was written, the Gospel of Jesus had reached the ends of the known world of the day and the stories of his life on earth and his teaching were on the lips of people who spoke all known languages of the world. In fact, by the end of the first century, there were approximately one million Christians around the world. Even before the word, “Christian” was used in Antioch, thousands of disciples had been moved by God’s Holy Spirit to engage in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus, the Messiah. Before the disciples separated from the Jewish tradition, before they became Christians, and before the institutional church took form, the Holy Spirit was busy creating believers. People united by one common faith in the Lord Jesus.

The passage then tells us that people were so surprised by the behaviors of this group that some believed they were drunk. But some who knew the Jewish Scriptures well made a connection between the disciples behaviors and the book of 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... Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” According to this interpretation, the disciples (and all of us) are living into the last days, the days of the Messiah. God’s Holy Spirit has been given to them (and to us) and now they prophesy and declare the wonderful works God has done on behalf of humanity. The fire the Holy Spirit brings burns away the debris of sin, and prepares the ground for the seeds of the Gospel. And those disciples do in fact plant wonderful seeds

beginning on that day, and we have been collecting the harvest of faith for over two thousands years. Billions of people have come face to face with the Savior, through the ministry of God's Holy Spirit in our hearts, and the seeds planted by those courageous men and women present that day in Jerusalem.

It is the Holy Spirit "Who gave courage to the early men and women martyrs, who guided the Ecumenical Councils, and who defined the Canon of Holy Scripture" (V.K. McCarty, [Here](#).) In fact, many theologians believe another name for Acts of the Apostles is "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit." We see no less than sixty times, Luke telling us about the work and intervention of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the early Church, including the conversion of Paul of Tarsus. Followers are "baptized in the Holy Spirit." Ministry is the "gift of the Holy Spirit." Luke also reminds us that Jesus himself had promised his Spirit as a gift to the disciples on many occasions. In fact, at the very beginning of the Gospel of Luke, John announced that the one who was to come after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (Luke 3:15-18). Well, here we see that promised baptism of Spirit and fire. It is the same baptism by which we are baptized. We too have this divine presence in our lives by virtue of the baptism we have received.

I believe we are in need of a new period of fire cleansing in our Church today and in our individual lives. So much debris has been accumulating over the centuries, so much grandiosity and arrogance, so much apathy and cruelty, so much status and wealth, so much privilege and power... that we have forgotten where we came from. We have forgotten about those men who burned with power and passion and who devoted themselves to a relationship with their beloved friend, Jesus. And through the living power of the risen Jesus, what we call The Holy Spirit, they changed the world for ever, one community at a time, one friendship at a time, one broken person at a time. We have become too fat, too institutionalized, too rich, too filled with self-adoration. All of this is debris that impedes the growth of the Church, and our own individual growth. I pray for another Pentecost here and now. Another personal encounter with the living spirit of Jesus in our lives. A magnificent burning of our apathy and self-sufficiency.

Let us join with Emma today, as she receives the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and as we renew our own vows, let us ask God's Holy Spirit to come into our hearts and burn away whatever is impeding our growth. May his fire allow the seeds of the Gospel to burn in us again, so that we may become his disciples in a world filled with despair and hopelessness. May our faith be rekindled and our apathy destroyed. And may he continue to bless us. Amen!