



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

## Baptized by Fire

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 5, 2022*

*The Day of Pentecost*

*Based on Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

I offer that prayer before almost every sermon I preach, but there's no Sunday when it's a more appropriate petition than it is on this day, the Great Feast of Pentecost. *"Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us!"* This is the day when we celebrate God's Fire and Wind: the unquenchable, untamable power of the Holy Spirit, burning and blowing through God's people as the enduring presence of Christ, following his Ascension into heaven.

Today is one of those great days in the life of the church, when we have it all going on. The celebration of the Feast of Pentecost and then Baptism, the declaration of lives for Christ, and then Holy Communion, where we become one in Christ and Christ becomes one is us.

It just doesn't get any better than this!

Now Pentecost is not the best known of the great feasts of the Church. Years ago, my son was injured playing soccer, and he was taken to the emergency room of the local hospital. The doctor, checking to see if he was coming out of the anesthetic and knowing Mother's Day was just around the corner, asked my son, "So, what big holiday is coming up?" To which my son replied, "Pentecost?" The doctor, obviously unfamiliar with our traditions, could only reply, "What-a-cost???"

Peter Leithart writes, "Pentecost is culturally invisible. There are no Pentecost sales at the department stores, no gift exchanges around lighted trees, no crèches, no heart-warming Hollywood holiday films with Jimmy Stewart, no Bing Crosby crooning about the rushing mighty winds."

Yet, Pentecost *should* be one of the most significant of the great feasts, because this is the day when we commemorate one of the most chaotic, fearsome, and pivotal moments in the Early Church. The Book of Acts says the believers 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."

And if that wasn't terrifying enough, they all began to understand one another: people from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem all began to hear one another speaking about God's deeds of power, and they understood every word that was said. Every single word.

And this new “understanding”? This wonderful miracle of “insight”? Well, that may just have been the most terrifying thing of all. Just think about it!

- What do you do when you discover the universe operates differently than you always believed it did?
- What do you do when the social and racial stereotypes you’ve held all your life are no longer believable?
- What do you do when you learn that people you could never understand or trust turn out to be just as intelligent and as decent and every bit as full of God’s grace as you are?

That great ancient preacher John Chrysostom wrote, “So now the Holy Spirit descends upon (the people of God) in fiery tongues to unify a divided world. The result is something new and strange.” New and strange indeed! After all these years, we still don’t know what to make of it. Some 2,000 years later, we’re still working, by the power of this Holy Spirit, on a “new and strange” mission to “unify a divided world”: a world divided by class, race, resources, geography, politics, and yes, even divided by religious belief itself.

We’re also divided between those who have experienced excruciating losses and those who have yet to experience them. We cannot see how the Holy Comforter can heal these divisions in Christ. It is a hard thing in which to believe. But the Holy Spirit is with us, even when we do not sense that presence, even now—even now—in the midst of a litany of great losses.

Dr. Henry Cadbury was a Professor of Divinity at Harvard and one of the translators of the first Revised Standard Version of the Bible. He once noted, “There are two kinds of people in the world. There are the *therefore* people and there are the *however* people. *Therefore* people say, ‘There are children going to bed hungry in our community, therefore’—and then they proceed to list all the ways they can meet the needs of the children in their community. *However* people make the same beginning statement, ‘There are children going to bed hungry in our community.’ But then they follow with the conclusion, ‘however’—and go on to explain why nothing can really be done about the problem.”

Those of you who will be baptized today—Henry, Elliott, Charlie, Teddi, Brody, Shay, and Cole—even if your godparents have to remember this for you, remember that we are all called to be *Therefore* people, because we have been empowered by the Spirit of God who abides *with* us and *in* us always. Things are possible for people of faith that no hardened unbeliever can begin to imagine.

Kenyan photojournalist and activist Boniface Mwangi observes there are two most powerful days in every human life: the day you’re born, and the day you discover why.

There’s something wild and untamable about God in the form of the Holy Spirit, a fact seldom noted by those telegenic television evangelists who tell you the Christian faith will make you wealthier, happier, and much, much thinner. As it turns out, that’s the “fool’s gold” of a theological approach, which doesn’t dig nearly deep enough to discover the true riches of the Holy Spirit. No, it’s not really gold; it’s just a cheap imitation metal, a tin untested by the fire. No, what they should be saying is that to come into the presence of God in the form of the Holy Spirit is to have your soul set ablaze. Talk about being baptized by fire!

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, didn’t mince any words when he spoke about the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit will burn us. If we are to have vision, and if we are to have warmth of love, we must be exposed to the pains of burning. All that is unloving, selfish, hard must be burnt out of our existence, burnt to destruction, burnt to ashes. The Spirit will burn (its) way into the core of our being in

the ever-painful process of disclosure, of penitence, and of divine forgiveness. Only by such burning can our hearts be fully exposed to the warmth and our minds be fully exposed to the light. There is no seeing and no warming without that burning. This is when we realize the saying of Jesus Christ found in one of the apocryphal documents: 'He that is near me is near the fire.'"

And so, this morning I offer to you the most outrageous invitation one human being could extend to another. Come and stand closer still to this sacred Fire. See this holy Flame. Marvel at its power. Feel the Wind. Experience the Heat. Believe that if God did it once, God can do it again.

Believe in that which you cannot see and join Henry, Elliott, Charlie, Teddi, Brody, Shay, and Cole and embrace the Spirit of the Living God which, recognized or unrecognized, bidden or unbidden, surely burns in our very midst.

***Let us pray,***

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire.*

Amen.

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