

June 4, 2017  
Pentecost Sunday

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Setting Fires”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine

*You breathe in.  
You breathe out.  
You breathe fire,  
the making of stars,  
the winds of creation.  
You breathe a Word  
that goes out  
and lays hands on people  
to heal and bless.*



*You breathe God in.  
and God out.  
You speak grace  
in tongues you can't know.  
Look at us,  
walking around,  
glowing embers.*

*~Steve Garnaas-Holmes*

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## **Psalm 104:24–34**

<sup>24</sup>O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. <sup>25</sup>Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. <sup>26</sup>There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it. <sup>27</sup>These all look to you to give them their food in due season; <sup>28</sup>when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. <sup>29</sup>When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. <sup>30</sup>When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. <sup>31</sup>May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works — <sup>32</sup>who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. <sup>33</sup>I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. <sup>34</sup>May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.

## **Acts 2, Selected Verses**

<sup>2</sup>When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know — <sup>23</sup>this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. <sup>24</sup>But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. <sup>32</sup>This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. <sup>33</sup>Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. <sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ <sup>38</sup>Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ...’ <sup>41</sup>So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. <sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

“*Setting Fires*”  
*Psalm 104:24–34; Acts 2, Selected Verses*

“We **set** some of those fires, but we didn’t **start** any of those fires.” This is what the Reverend Cecil Murray told his congregation the Sunday after the Los Angeles riots twenty-five years ago. After police officers were acquitted of the beating of Rodney King, an African American motorist, the city of LA erupted in flames... flames fueled by **anger, injustice, helplessness and desperation**. In his sermon, Reverend Murray called his Los Angeles congregation, who themselves **burned** with anger, injustice, helplessness, and desperation, to clarify for the rest of America what those riots were really about. “We’re not proud that we set those fires,” he preached. “But we’d like to make a distinction to America this morning: We **set** some of those fires, but we didn’t **start** any of those fires.”<sup>1</sup>

Today is Pentecost, a day when we remember and celebrate God’s gift of the Holy Spirit, which led to the formation of the church. It’s a **birthday** of sorts, a time when we reflect on what it means to have this extraordinary gift. Then and now, the Spirit is a gift that affords both **power** and **responsibility**. The **power** is to speak things we have never spoken before — to share the story of God’s love made manifest in Jesus. The **responsibility** is to **gather** people together — all kinds of *different* people — into a community notable for its *unity*.

Like the creation of the world as we know it, the birth of the church was a *mighty act of God*. The church did not come to be because a group of like-minded people came together and kept everyone else out. The church was not a creation of those who spoke the same language and shared the same culture. If the church was a human construction that’s exactly what it would be; but *the church isn’t a human construction; it is one of God’s most astonishing miracles*.<sup>2</sup>

Through a mighty act of God, the church is a diverse group of people *gathered together* and, in the story of Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit, this diverse group displays a *unity* more powerful than any of their differences. The church as a diverse group of believers who find unity in Christ:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2017/04/28/525992216/the-rev-cecil-murray-then-and-now-on-the-1992-la-riots>

<sup>2</sup> Thomas W. Currie, “Pentecost’s Costly Gift.” *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XL, No. 4, p. 6.

this is certainly *not* a fire we started — in fact, that's not a fire any human being *could* start. *Such a fire could only have its origin in God.* We didn't start this fire...but we are called to **keep setting it.**

In the third installment of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, when it is time to gather far-flung people together to defend the land of Gondor, the characters rely on a system of signal fires. Huge pyres had been set up on seven mountaintops throughout the land. When one pyre was lit, the people who saw it knew it was time to go into battle. In the movie, this ancient way of signaling comes to life as the first fire is lit. Then, moments later, on another mountaintop far off in the distance, the next pyre bursts into flame, then the next, then the next until all of Gondor knows that it's time to unite.

The church began when the first apostles received the Holy Spirit as a tongue of fire which rested upon each one. But the church **persisted** and **grew** because the apostles *took that flame* and used it to set **new fires** by sharing the good news with all sorts of people. It didn't matter that the people who were the first recipients of this good news were from far-flung places; it didn't matter that they were different in culture and language. The Spirit gave the apostles the ability to speak new languages. *But the languages weren't the point.*

The point is the Spirit empowered the apostles to go out and meet the people around them *where they were*. In the book of Acts, when faithful Jews from near and far gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost, meeting people where they were meant, literally, speaking their language. But as time went on, this would change. Meeting people where they were would mean eating foods that had formerly been forbidden. It would mean baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch, who wasn't from Jerusalem or technically Jewish. It would mean including even *Gentiles* in the family of God and the community of the church. *The gift of the Spirit gives us the power to meet people where they are.* In *our* time, meeting people where they are might mean...Reaching out and learning from someone with a different political perspective than your own. Intentionally befriending a person of a different race or socio-economic group, and working to understand the challenges they face. And eventually, it might mean growing **this** church with people who are *different* from us.

Recently, a journalist traveling with Secretary of Defense James Mattis asked him what worried him most in his new position. He expected the answer to be ISIS or Russia or the defense budget. Instead, Mattis said, “[what worries me is] the lack of political unity in America. The lack of a fundamental friendliness. It seems like an awful lot of people in America and around the world feel spiritually and personally alienated, whether it be from organized religion or from local community school districts or from their governments.”

The lack of unity in American life right now is undeniable, as is the fact that many people, for all kinds of reasons, feel alienated from organized religion – which is, of course, what the church now represents. **But as people of faith, as the church, as the body of Christ here earth, we need not fear the chaos or diversity or confusion around us, because we know this is the climate in which the Spirit does her best work.**

Now, perhaps more than ever, the church has a unique and powerful word to share with the world, that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, with all our differences, we can be *one*. This unity does not deny the diversity of color, or opinions, or even ideology. It is not a unity found in *similarity*, it is unity found in *difference*. It’s a unity that comes with the Spirit’s embrace, an embrace that can hold together Democrats and Republicans, Millennials and Baby Boomers, rich and poor, those who long for what used to be and those aching for something new.

Tom Long once announced to his congregation that he planned to start a class on the basics of the Christian faith, both for those new to the faith, or for those who just wanted a refresher. The next week, he went to the classroom expecting a large group of people; instead there were three school-aged girls. He tried to hide his disappointment, and over the next few weeks he did his best to teach them about the faith.

The week before Pentecost, Long said to them, "Do you girls know what Pentecost is?" They didn't. So, he taught them. "Well, Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads, and they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world." Two of the little girls took this account rather calmly, but one of them looked astonished, her eyes growing as big as saucers. When she could finally speak, she said, "Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday!" The

beautiful thing, Long reflected later, was not that she misunderstood. The beautiful thing was she thought such a thing could happen in her church, that God's Spirit could come to her congregation and give them a word to speak the world desperately needs to hear.<sup>3</sup>

This is precisely what happens, not just on Pentecost, but every Sunday! Even right here, in our church! In fact, we don't even have to be in church to receive the Spirit, for it is always present to us. And we need the fire of the Holy Spirit today just as much as it was needed on that first day of Pentecost when the Spirit showed up. We need the Spirit's power to enable us to do things we could never do on our own, to live out our church's vision to be a welcoming spiritual home, live God's inclusive love, share Christ's compassion, and do justice in the world. *We need the Spirit to be who we say we are*, because that is not something we can do on our own, any more than the disciples could speak all those languages without the Spirit's help. We need the Spirit so that we can go from this place and **meet people where they are**, and so that we can truly welcome whoever comes through our doors – which means welcoming their views and ideas about God and religion and even about how to do and be church. **We need the Spirit to help us set the fires God started at Pentecost.**

We didn't start this fire...but we are the inheritors of it. This Spirit of fire, the likes of which the world had never seen before, still rests upon and within each one of us, so that the mighty act of God which is this thing we call the church, a place where we find unity not in spite of our differences but because of them, so that the church continues, even through us, to be a beacon of God's welcome, love, compassion, and justice.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Long, "What's the Gift?" Sermon for Day 1, May 27, 2012, [http://day1.org/3822-whats\\_the\\_gift](http://day1.org/3822-whats_the_gift)