

Sermon for Day of Pentecost Year A 2020
Blood, Fire and Smoky Mist—Pentecost 2020

Gathered in one place . . .
The sound of the rush of a violent wind
Fire
Speaking in other languages . . .
What does this mean?
They are filled with new wine . . .
Blood, fire and smoky mist . . .

The birth of the church—which is what we celebrate on this Sunday morning—is nothing less than a description of organized chaos. The story of Pentecost begins by stating, “they were all gathered in one place” . . . we cannot safely be gathered in one place or celebrate the feast of Pentecost in this way. And, yet . . . in another sense, we are in one place. And not to put too fine a point on it, we are in a *hard* place, a place of grief, a place of uncertainty, loss, and even horror. Because today we are being confronted by two foes—the coronavirus and the virus of racism one which is a so-called “novel” or “new” virus—the other is over 400 years old. And yet, though we divide ourselves—We are bound together as one people, one humanity, one planet, facing a common threat – the coronavirus, but even more deadly, the virus of human sinfulness that truly knows no boundaries. As the Apostle Paul truthfully proclaimed, “*All* have fallen short of the glory of God.” No one can claim to be free of the stain of sin—and, that includes the sin of racism.

The death of George Floyd in the sight of all who have eyes to see and even ears to hear has brought this truth home to us who witnessed a white Minneapolis police officer pin his neck with his knee, crushing the life and breath out of him.

Is it any wonder that our cities are on fire?
Is it any wonder that we seem to be speaking in other languages?
And yet . . . I wonder more, do we hear and understand the pain and anguish they express?

It has been observed that fire and wind tend to show up in scripture when God is in the act of making something new. The burning bush, the pillar of fire leading the Israelites through the wilderness, and now here on the Day of Pentecost wind and fire show up again.

Their appearance together in the bible is rare, precisely because fire and wind are a dangerous combination—capable of leaving unfathomable amounts of destruction in their wake—In the past year, we have witnessed the wildfires in Australia and California in the past year.

There are things in our lives that we hope can be left behind. Some things we just need to burn down to leave room for other things to grow up in its place.

Jesus tells us of this when he says in the gospel of John,
Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned . . . My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples . . . If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love . . . I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

My heart was broken to see two African American men senselessly killed—Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd.

One was out jogging; the other was suffocated to death
while handcuffed on the ground.

Together, we all need to pray for the day
when the divisions of race and racism—both personal and systemic—
bias and prejudice will indeed wither and be burned to the ground!

Thanks be to God, one of the miracles of Pentecost,
and the hope of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit strives to do just that.

Pentecost invites us into another way of thinking about the world.
Through fire and wind, the Holy Spirit brought all people together—
All those hard-to-pronounce peoples and languages—
All were prophesying and hearing the gospel—the good news.

Lots of amazing things have happened
since the Day of Pentecost as recorded in the 2nd chapter of Acts.
Chaos ensued then, just as it seems to be ensuing now.
Rushing...falling...power...pouring ...portents...
smoky mist, darkness, blood, glory . . . and, salvation.
It seems that the Holy Spirit came
not so much to gently soothe us,
but more to shake us up . . . to awaken us.
Apparently the Spirit is not *that kind* of comforter . . .
that is, the kind that we hunker down under
when we want a few more minutes of much-craved sleep.

The entire Book of Acts from which our second lesson comes,
illustrates the fraught relationship between the Spirit and the Church.
One of my seminary professors
even called the book of Acts the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit”
because the entire the narrative consists of the Spirit
pushing the church into places it would rather not be.

Just as the little community of Galilean disciples are recovering from being inundated on Pentecost by three thousand new Jewish believers from all corners of the empire with differences in language, culture, and religious practices, Philip's preaching brings into the church, believers from among the hated Samaritans.

Next, Peter baptizes a gentile officer of the Roman occupation force *and* his family.

And then, through Paul's ministry, the Spirit of God continues to demolish the racial, cultural, and societal walls dividing people one from another. So far from leading this bold advance into the future, the church is more or less dragged there by the mighty current of God's Spirit.

And yet, as wild and independent as the Holy Spirit surely is, the Spirit is not an anonymous and impersonal force.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, that is, the risen Christ "abiding" with his disciples.

Thus, in his letter to the Corinthians, which is an alternative reading for this Sunday in Pentecost, Paul insists that no one can say "Jesus is Lord" *except by* the Holy Spirit.

This is important because there are other spirits out there that are *far from* holy.

The spirit of nationalism would have us put the interests of our nation over Jesus' command to love our neighbors on whatever side of the border they might be.

The spirit of racism inspires fear and loathing of people of color, who differ from us in appearance, culture, or language.

I don't believe I need to tell you that these spirits and their demonic leading have been woven into the fabric of American Christianity.

For this reason, John the evangelist warns us,
“do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits
to see whether they are from God.”

In this age of alternative facts,
conspiracy theories,
and hateful ideologies,
we need more than ever
to question the voices seeking to persuade, inspire, and move us.
Where are these voices coming from?
From whom do they speak?
Are they in keeping with Jesus’ life and teaching
as testified in the scriptures?
Do these voices urge us to love or to hate?
Do these voices advocate division versus diversity?
Do these voices proclaim uniformity over unity?

It is true that the Spirit of God works on a timetable and agenda
we seldom understand or foresee in advance.
We can no more control the Spirit than we can control the wind.
Nevertheless, we can make room for the Spirit to work in our lives.
And, while we always are in need of this,
can you think of a time of need
greater than the one we are living in now?

For some of us this means setting aside time for reading scripture,
for prayer, for worship, for self-examination and study.
These days of pandemic that are keeping many of us at home offer a
unique opportunity for that to happen.

For some of us, making room for the Spirit
might require an exorcism of sorts.
Television, social media, and virtual communities all have the potential
for being channels of human connection, fellowship and inspiration.
However, they can also become channels
of anger, hostility, and propaganda.

In case of the later, it may be necessary to our spiritual—
and our physical and psychological health—
to limit or excise these sources of input.

Over and over, I have heard many of us express
the desire “to return to normal.”

Yet I think God is saying to us through all the whirlwind and fire—
that’s just not good enough—
especially if we think of “normal”
as the “same old, same old,”
as going along to get along,
perpetuating systemic racism,
tolerating violence,
hoarding of limited resources,
profiteering and
the social inequities of poverty and discrimination
and xenophobia.

That’s not the “normal” I think God intends for us.

Here’s the salient point:

the Spirit of Christ is the firepower of love.

The Spirit wants to speak through the chaos of our time and place
and *create something new*.

Two years ago, the Presiding Episcopal Bishop, Michael Curry,
offered a vision, a prophecy, if you will,
just as was promised by the ancient prophet Joel
and was preached by Peter so long ago.

What if, Bishop Curry, asked,
we were to stop and think or imagine where love—
that is the love of Christ—*is* the way.

Imagine our homes and families, Bishop Curry preached,
when love is the way.

*Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way.
Imagine governments and nations where love is the way.
Imagine business and commerce when love is the way.
Imagine this tired old world when love is the way,
unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive.
When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry
in this world ever again.
When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
When love is the way, poverty will become history.
When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.
When love is the way, we will lay our swords and shields down by the
riverside to study war no more.
When love is the way, there's plenty good room,
plenty good room, for all God's children.
Because when love is the way, we will actually treat each other, well,
like we are actually family.
When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all and we
are brothers and sisters, children of God.
That . . . my brothers and sisters . . . is a new heaven,
a new earth, a new world, a new human family.*

Because . . . as the scriptures tell us . . . love is fire.
God, who is love, appeared long ago to Moses
as a blazing fire that did not consume . . .
God, who is love, lead the Israelites through the wilderness
as a pillar of fire through the night . . .

God, who is love, came among us as the Light of the world—
a light that no darkness can overcome . . .
God, who is love, poured out his Spirit
and tongues of fire appeared over everyone
and prophecy poured out of God's people—
young and old, male and female,
the rich and the poor, people of every tribe and nation.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Catholic priest, scientist, scholar and mystic, wrote that the discovery and harnessing of fire was one of the great scientific and technological discoveries in all of human history. Fire, Chardin said, made human civilization possible.

Fire made it possible to cook food and provide sanitary ways of eating which reduced the spread of disease in its time.

Fire made it possible to warm environments that would otherwise be inhospitable for humans to live in.

The harnessing of fire makes it possible for us to get around—our cars, buses, trains and planes *all* operate due to controlled harnessed fire.

Fire makes it possible for us to text and tweet and email, Instagram and Facebook and debate with each other on all forms of social networking.

Fire, Chardin observed was one of the greatest discoveries in all of human history.

But, what kind of revolution would ensue, Chardin wondered, if humanity ever captured the energy of love . . .

well, it seems, according to Chardin
. . . *it would be the second time in history that we discovered fire . . . the fire of love.*

Yet, fire, like love . . . requires that we take risks.

On the day of the first Pentecost, the disciples were “on fire.”
On that day, the church spoke the language of love, they spoke “Jesus.”

The Spirit of God rushed in to empower people to do something astounding:
to communicate effectively with one another.

Bridges were not only built but even crossed over—
and differences among them, instead of dividing,
provided a vision of just how great the power of God’s love is—
God’s love creates a unity amid diversity,
God’s love creates unity out of diversity.
Through ordinary human speech,
God speaks and seeks to create the world anew.
This new creation does not happen without us.
We need not only “speak Jesus”
but we must “live Jesus.”
To paraphrase Lutheran pastor and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—
as Christians who stand at the foot of the Cross,
we need to learn to see the world
from the perspective of those who suffer,
those who are oppressed,
and those who are persecuted.
In his time and place, that meant that Bonhoeffer
learned to see the world through
the suffering, oppression, and persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany.
For us, this means we need to see the world
through the suffering of black and brown people,
from the pain of a black man with a “peace-officer’s” knee on his neck.

Bishop Eaton, our presiding bishop,
has echoed Bonhoeffer when she said,
“Until a white majority feels so deeply in our soul
that the pain of black and brown people is our own pain,
it will continue to be dangerous to be black or brown in America.”

In the midst of the infection of two viruses—
racism and Covid-19 what *if* we discovered love anew,
the redemptive power of love?
What if we learned to see the world through
the suffering of others who are oppressed?

Could we—as co-creators with our God of love,
make this old and broken world a new world?
Could we speak the language of God’s love,
could we speak “Jesus” so well
that even the deaf could hear it and the blind could see it?

We don’t need a special feast day for these things to take place.
The promised Helper will come and give us strength,
encouragement and ability any day and every day.
Through the harnessed fire of the Spirit,
we are not only sustained but empowered
to be faithful witnesses and agents of God’s love
to heal and transform and renew the world,
one moment, one person, one event at a time.
The fire power of the Spirit, the fire power of God’s love
was given to us when we were baptized.

What if you and I and the whole church
discovered the fire power of the way of love?
What then?
Because, quite truthfully,
going back to “normal” is not nearly good enough
and it is not the faithful option.

My prayer is that all of us who thirst for righteousness
will drink from Christ’s life-giving stream,
and then go out and witness in word and deed to
God’s justice and the peace of Christ.