

On Fire

Rachel Watson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

May 19, 2024

Texts: Acts 2:1-21, Exodus 3:1-12

Pentecost is one of my favorite Sundays. It's right up there with Christmas and Easter. And Transfiguration and Ascension Day. I love these celebration days! And the Pentecost story is full of wonder. As a Christian educator that's spent years in children's and youth ministry, I love pulling out all the fun crafts and games and activities that go along with this day. It's a day of red and yellow and orange balloons that bounce around the room as we keep them floating in the wind and they keep landing on our heads. It's a day of flame-shaped headbands that make each of us look like a giant birthday candle with a little flame on our heads. Which goes along with the birthday cakes we eat because it IS the birthday of the Church. And it's a day of many languages – the day when children learn to recite “hello” or “peace” or “spirit” in a multitude of languages and sing bilingual songs as they celebrate the diversity of languages spoken on that first Pentecost morning.

But I wonder, sometimes, if this story is so familiar, the activities so familiar, that we stop noticing the extraordinary nature of this story. And I wonder, sometimes, if we smile as we see the children play with this imaginative text, and then try to tame the fanciful elements into something we can control. So, today, I invite you to lean into wonder as we revisit this story.

Okay, so it's been a rollercoaster of emotions for the disciples these last two months. Only fifty-three days ago, they had watched in horror as their teacher was arrested, tried, and killed. Three days later, as they huddled, grief-stricken, in an upper room, Jesus appeared through a locked door and then ate some fish to prove he was alive. How relieved, and also confused, they must have been as he proceeded to spend forty days teaching them about the kingdom of God. Then ten days ago, he just left, leaving them staring into the sky after him, confused and bewildered once more.

Now he'd told him to wait in Jerusalem...to stay where they were until they had received the promised gift of the Father. And so they did. It wasn't just the eleven – more than one hundred followers had joined them there. That morning, they were all there in one place and while the house was large enough for all of them to fit inside, it was most likely bursting at the seams with people. The disciples were taking care of business...organizing the chaos...and waiting for...something.

And then, suddenly, there was a rush of wind. Not a gentle breeze that tickles the windchimes into song, but a violent wind like a hurricane that shakes the roof and rattles the windows. And as people are looking this way and that to figure out what has happened, tongues of what looks like fire settle on them.

Now this fire is not normal fire. It settles upon them, but it doesn't hurt them. They feel its warmth, but it doesn't burn them up. And, friends, nothing in the story tells us that this flame was a tiny one that rested on their head – that's the Pentecost headband from your childhood that you

are remembering. Think bigger – it’s why we wear red – this flame has the power to be all-consuming.

Remember the burning bush that caught Moses’s attention on the road...the bush was completely consumed in flame, yet it was not destroyed. So it is with this holy fire. It’s a consuming fire, a transforming fire, but it doesn’t destroy.

The room erupts with voices, everyone talking at once. Which is not surprising, what with the fire everywhere. Except that, even with everyone talking at once, something amazing can be heard. It’s not words themselves, although they, too, are amazing words of good news, but it’s languages in which the people were speaking, no longer their own, but all manner of different languages. They could do nothing but continue to share the words that filled their souls with anyone who would listen.

They were on fire.

Now, the phrase ‘on fire’ has many meanings, as a wise woman reminded me when she read my sermon title earlier this week. “I know,” I responded, not giving her any clue as to where I was going with this. Let’s explore this fire.

Here, it speaks to those ideas that won’t let go of us, that spur us into action...an enthusiasm and passion for the work that we know in our soul needs to be done. Those disciples were filled with passion for the sharing of the gospel. Even the diversity of human language could not get in the way.

Perhaps you’ve felt this passion kindled inside you. A place where you saw injustice and knew you needed to help, lending words and actions to make the world more just for all people. A place you knew you were called to stand up with a neighbor even where that is not easy or popular. Perhaps you might have even had to learn a new language, bringing the story to them instead of gate-keeping with our language, whether that means learning Spanish, sign language, gen alpha slang, or the language that soothes a broken spirit so they can know this good news belongs to them too.

And, friends, the people were listening. A crowd from the city gathered, people from all over the world. Can you imagine how surprising that would have been to be in a foreign place, but to hear the familiar words of your own language inviting you to listen? The crowd is amazed at what they are hearing...and also a little skeptical about the sobriety of this group...but they’re listening. The crowd now numbers in the thousands. People are everywhere.

Jesus would have been quite comfortable talking to a group this large. But the disciples are less practiced. Peter, though, knows just what to do. It’s like a fire has been kindled inside him and he needs to speak. And so he preaches his first sermon. And it is a doozy of a sermon. Peter is on fire.

For Peter, being on fire means that he was unstoppable. It was like he was being driven from within, a fire inside. He wasn’t afraid anymore if he attracted attention, if people stared in

disgust. He needed to do this work because it was the right thing to do. And something amazing happened to those who were listening too. Three thousand people joined the disciples that day.

That's the thing with holy fire. When the Spirit takes hold, we can do things we didn't think were possible and when we work with the Spirit, others can hear more than just our words. Maybe you've felt this... a calling to reach out to help someone, comfort someone, provide for someone... and the sharing of the moment is bigger than both of you. You knew just the words to say or just the thing to do... even though you had no idea how you knew. The Holy Spirit burned within you and between you.

Peter and the disciples were on fire that Pentecost morning. The word 'fire' is a familiar one in my house... this is fire and that is fire, my gen alpha daughter proclaims. In this case, something that is 'fire' is outstanding or gaining popularity quickly. Certainly, the Pentecost message was fire. The people were moved, passion was kindled, hearts were warmed as our Methodist friends would say.

When we aren't afraid of what the Spirit can do, when we are willing to allow ourselves to be transformed, when we don't try to tame the Holy Spirit into something we can control but rather let it burn within us, we can be agents of love, justice, and peace in our world. We can break open glimpses of the kingdom, little pockets where God's will is done, places where others can see and feel the light of Christ alive in this place.

Friends, this holy fire of Pentecost still burns today, baptizing us with its power and calling us into life with God. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and theologian, said that the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

I was asked at a conference once to text someone who knew me well and ask when they saw me come alive. Knowing Douglas was working and, even if he answered, he has a penchant for sarcasm, I texted my friend Julia instead. She immediately answered, "when you're writing or talking about liturgy." A second later, she added, "especially if you're finding ways for children to be involved in it." She's not wrong. I feel that fire settle around me when I'm figuring out how to speak the gospel in the language of children and youth and helping them find their home in the family of God. It is my deep gladness and the holy fire that was given to me. And so it is my calling to be transformed to use it to meet the world's need.

I wonder what makes you burst with joy, what causes you to feel your heart warm when you think about it, what makes you burn with enthusiasm? Maybe it's when you're making things grow. Maybe it's when you're driving. Maybe it's when you're adding beauty to a space. Maybe it's when you're sharing stories with someone. How can you speak that language in a way that helps the world be a more faithful and just place? By hauling food to the food pantry? By cleaning a chapel or arranging a room for a meeting? By planting a garden or sharing the harvest? By visiting or teaching? I wonder what would happen if we answered that call of the Spirit. If all of us allowed ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gives us ability. The world would be on fire!

May it be so. Amen.