

Sunday June 5, 2019 “About the Fire” Day of Pentecost

The word “Pentecost” comes from a Greek word which means “fifty.”

Pentecost is the fiftieth day—its tradition began in Judaism as a celebration of the fiftieth day after Passover. For Christians, it is the fiftieth day after Easter and celebrates the beginning of the church.

The story of the Christian Pentecost is pretty straightforward. The disciples are gathered together when the Holy Spirit comes upon them in ways they can see and hear (wind and tongues of fire) and then in ways that ultimately lead them to speak. It isn't uncommon to see streamers or balloons or kites or other objects that can catch a breeze as part of a processional. It is a celebratory day.

How do you think of the Holy Spirit as fire? It is a fire that burns to ash?

Is that what will happen to the disciples and their Pentecost fervor? The day is a flashover that will eventually burn itself (and them) out?

Perhaps you perceive the Holy Spirit as a carefully portioned tongue of fire, given in reasonable measure to each disciple.

I watch a series on Netflix's "A.D. Kingdom and Empire." It starts after the resurrection of Christ. The episode on the Day of Pentecost the disciples are gathered to celebrate the Feast of Weeks with other Jews. The disciples are discussing what they should do next when one says we should pray. As they started praying the prayer Jesus taught them a mighty wind came through. The stronger the wind got the more fervently the disciples prayed. They show the outside of the building where the disciples are and fire is flowing in the wind around the building. It goes in through the door and windows, the disciples started speaking in multiple languages. People who spoke these languages heard accents and words in grammars that were familiar. As a result, they did not have to nudge the person next to them and ask, "What are they saying? What is that word? What do they mean? Nor did they have to take to confess, "I do not understand." They could hear the good news of God for themselves. No one had to abandon the culture that gave them an identity in order to hear from God. God's word came that day in a

way that expressed God's deep affirmation of diversity as a key ingredient in unity.

Can you imagine everyone here speaking a different language, but each are able to hear and understand their words in our own native language.

How amazing that must have been for those there in that room.

What if Pentecost's tongues of fire are like the flames of the bush where Moses received his own commission from God? What if the fire of Pentecost is fire that burns but does not consume?

Pentecost is all about change. Truly, there is nothing to this story except tremendous change. Change has already happened (Jesus is gone) and change is ongoing. As the writer pens this tale he knows what some of the upheavals are going to be for this group of believers. They'll struggle with pressures from outside and inside their society. They'll want to bring in newcomers but will not be happy with some of the changes newcomers bring. They'll try to be inclusive, but not always successfully. They'll attempt to carry on the way they think Jesus would

want them to, and sometimes they'll fail at it. They'll argue about the best way to go on.

Change isn't always easy.

But change they must. It's part of life; it's part of a life of faith. Invited or not, welcomed or not, it comes to all of us.

Change is inevitable.

As individuals or in institutions, we can resist change, ignore change, berate change. We often want to go back to those times when things were comfortable or exciting, important or fun, more free or more structured. But going back in time is impossible. Moving forward is our only choice.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. [from Acts 2]

Like that group waiting, praying, hoping, we look to see what's coming next. The one thing we know is that it won't be what we expect.

Change is coming.

Let's meet it with our heads and hearts on fire.

Seeing the Pentecost fire in that way might help us prepare for a season of Pentecost rather than a day of Pentecost. The fire does not go out but neither does it consume us until there is nothing left of us.

And yet the fires of the bush and Pentecost are not exactly the same. Or perhaps the fire is the same but the relationship between God and humans is not. Moses stood at a distance, warned from coming closer,

watching this miracle of fire as he heard the voice of God. In the Pentecost story, this fire rests on each disciple individually. They are no longer spectators, they are partakers, sharers of the fire. The fire is not a spectacle to be observed but a part of who they now are.

In both events, the fire is associated with God's promise to "be with". To be with Moses as he goes back to Egypt to free God's people. To be with the disciples as they dream dreams and see visions and make disciples of all nations. Fire that burns but does not consume ensures that disciples will not, on their first Spirit-filled day, go out in a blaze of glory. Rather it sparks a witness that against all cultural and societal odds will grow Christ's church. Come, Holy Spirit.

In this Lenten-Easter cycle we learned once again that we are saved. Every sin that ever was or ever will be was nailed to that cross. In the risen Christ we know that eternal life is ours. We know that it is God's gift outright. We need only believe and, as a sign of our belief, that we be baptized into the family of believers. We know too that believing is

not a spectator sport. We can't plump down on life's proverbial couch and wait for Dominos to deliver eternal life. Our faith must be active, not passive. Only in an active faith can we generate the hope and the love that are the legacy of our redemption.

Sadly, like the apostles, we are slow learners and fast forgetters. That's why the Holy Spirit comes to us as it did to them, not as a visitor, but as the abiding presence of God. You can ignore him, but not if you value salvation. He's with us now. He's why you are reading God's word, today. He answers every prayer. If we take nothing else from these past ninety days... be awake, be alert to God's presence in your life. Receive the Holy Spirit.

And here's your connection for flame and wind on Pentecost...when laying a fire, light the upwind side so the wind blows the flame into the "fuel".

It is just that simple, it is just that hard.