

# The Fire of Pentecost

## Scriptures

Acts 2:1-11

Ps 104:25-32

1 Cor 12:4-13

Jn 20:19-23

## Opening

I take great delight in the first verse of Scripture we read this morning: “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.” Well we may not all together as we would like, our capacity is limited to 50 persons, but after more than two months, the Lord’s people gather in this holy place on the feast of Pentecost. Glory to God!

We long for that greater fullness, that visible togetherness, that we have known in times past. For many of our number it’s still wiser and safer to worship with us from home. For our brothers and sisters worshipping from home, I think of St. Paul’s words to his beloved church in Philippi: ‘For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.’<sup>1</sup>

I remember the first Thanksgiving I missed with my family. I was living overseas and couldn’t make the trip back home. My family made a video on Thanksgiving Day and they all shared how much they missed me. Let’s use our camera this morning to do the same. Let’s greet our friends worshipping from home. All together: “Peace be with you!”

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1.8

## Pentecost in the Wilderness

It's fitting we offer Jesus' Upper Room greeting to one another. That's where the disciples waited for the promise of the Holy Spirit who would come a light the fire within. Luke prepares us for Pentecost in the story of the Emmaus Road. Cleopas and his companion returned from Emmaus to the Upper Room, telling the twelve, "Our hearts burned within us as the Lord spoke with us on the road." They would never be able to discuss, read, or hear the story of Moses and the Prophets without seeing the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus throughout the old story.

Just as it was on the Emmaus Road on Easter Day, so it is in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Before the winds ever picked up in Jerusalem, God had long prepared his people to receive his fire within. Pentecost didn't begin in Jerusalem, it began in the desert.

Moses was in the desert of Sinai, helping his father-in-law, Jethro, with his sheep when a bush begins burning. The bush was burning but was *not consumed*. God could have chosen any sign to appear to Moses but he comes in the fire. Moses sees something of God's nature—he burns, but the fire doesn't ever die out.

The vision is not a silent revelation. The Fire starts speaking. The Fire tells Moses his power will deliver the Hebrews from Egyptian tyranny. And Moses has a mission: bring my people back to this same mountain.

When Moses returns to Sinai, he's not alone; he has all the sons and daughters of Abraham with him. When he returns to Sinai, it isn't a small bush that's burning and speaking. The whole mountain is on fire. The mountain burned for forty days but was not consumed. God spoke his wisdom, his words, his Law to Moses on that fiery mountain. Then, God wrote his holy words in Hebrew with his finger on tablets of stone.

The covenant came with fire, yet in time, Israel no longer feared that divine fire. She turned cold as she turned away from the fire. The covenant recorded on stone did not soften their hearts. Instead their hearts hardened as stones, toward God, toward one another.

And then through fiery prophets the Lord declared a mystery. After the fire of judgement and exile, God promised something entirely new.

First Jeremiah:

And I will make a *new*covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...I will put my law *within*them, and I will write it on their *hearts*.I will be their God and they shall be my people. <sup>2</sup>

Then Ezekiel:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. <sup>3</sup>

And finally the prophet Joel:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved" <sup>4</sup>

## The Fire Within

To say that Pentecost was the birthday of the church is a bit too mild. Pentecost was an explosion that had been building for centuries. The fire in the midst of the burning bush; the

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 31.31-33

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 36.26-27

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:17, 21 ESV

Fire on Sinai comes *inside* the human heart. The Holy Spirit makes them “partakers of the divine nature.” They were burning with holy power but not consumed.

The Holy Spirit could have taken any form he wished to reveal his presence. The Spirit came in the form of the dove at Jesus’ baptism. At Jesus’ transfiguration, the Spirit appears in the cloud. But when the Spirit dwells in the the heart, he comes as fire. Why? Two reasons, at least.

The Holy Spirit **purifies** our hearts. Fire purifies. The Spirit will make us holy as he is holy. There is no Pentecost without the message of *repentance*. When Peter preached his Pentecost sermon, the crowd was “cut to the heart.” The Spirit purifies our hearts because they harden over the years. The Holy Spirit consumes the heart of stone and gives a tender heart, a loving heart.

The Spirit also comes as Fire to burn **a new love** in our hearts. This is not a one-time experience. The Spirit alone can *rekindle* holy love in our hearts.

I’ve been a pastor for 15 years now. One of the deepest experiences of suffering I’ve noticed among Christians, even very experienced and committed Christians, is this: in my heart of hearts, I begin doubting the love of God for myself. Oh, I believe it in my mind. That’s not problem, I know the right answers. *My heart* doesn’t believe what my *mind* says. And I believe in the love of God is vast and free for other people, but somehow I doubt the same is true for me. That is deep and profound suffering.

Here’s the truth of that suffering: you cannot rekindle the love of God in your heart by drilling it into your head. You don’t need more knowledge. You need a personal Pentecost. Pentecost is not a mental achievement. Pentecost is a fire warming your heart with the love of God.

The Holy Spirit alone can rekindle holy love in your heart. I’m sure it seemed like ages when the apostles waited in the Upper Room for the Holy Spirit to come. In our story and in theirs, waiting for the Spirit will be part of our experience. But the promise of the Spirit then and now is not in vain. He comes and he comes and he comes again to rekindle our

hearts. For when our hearts receive his love, we burn with love for God. And if your heart begins burning with love of God, you can't love God without loving your neighbor.

## To Love the Nations

Pentecost is deeply personal, but it is not *solely* personal. Flames appeared above each apostle, yet they were "all together in one place." The love of God that burned in their individual hearts became a vibrant community of mutual love. They lived life together, worshiped together each day, at together, prayed for another. They shared their possessions with one another, giving priority for the poor among them. All was not perfect after Pentecost, yet the Holy Spirit released this new love for one another into the world through his Church.

This week we see more reasons to pray that the Holy Spirit would release new love for another here in America. In the past month, we have seen a new pattern of racial violence against people of color, most notably the death of George Floyd in Minnesota. And when one looks back on the past ten years, we see this heartbreaking pattern has only increased for *the whole decade*. During the coronavirus pandemic, violent acts against immigrants have risen, too, especially among Asian Americans. Incidents of anti-Asian harassment and violence have skyrocketed here in America.

Four ACNA bishops composed a powerful letter yesterday in response to these events. This letter will be available on our website and I quote these especially important words from their letter:

George's death is not merely the most recent evidence that proves racism exists against Black people in this country. But it is a vivid manifestation of the ongoing devaluation of black life. At the root of all racism is a heretical anthropology that devalues the (image of God) in us all. The gospel reveals that all are equally created, sinful and equally in need of the saving work of Christ. The racism we lament is not just interpersonal. It exists in the implicit and explicit customs and attitudes that do disproportionate harm to ethnic minorities in our country.... We confess that too often ethnic minorities have felt that contending for biblical justice is a burden they bear alone. In the end, our hope is not in our efforts, but in the shed blood of Jesus that reconciles God to humanity and humans to each other.

To these good words I offer the petitions from our Prayer Book as we ask the Lord to "Deliver us from poverty, prejudice, and oppression, that *peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with mercy.*

So much of the violence begins with the tongue. I grieve the virus of hateful words circulating so widely among so many in our country. As Christians, we must have special care over the tongue, especially in these days. Remember the words of James, an apostle of Pentecost, who wrote of the tongue: "How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness...With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so." <sup>5</sup>

God could have chosen any shape for that fire appearing above the apostles at Pentecost. But he chose the shape of a tongue. And when they began speaking in tongues, what did the nations hear? The multitudes said: "we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." That's the ultimate purpose of the tongue: to proclaim the goodness of God, the justice of God, the deliverance of God, the forgiveness of God, the mercy of God, and the love of God. He desires to pour out his Spirit on all flesh, all nations.

I walked in the narthex earlier this week and paused before a beautiful photograph of GAFCON 2018 when Anglicans from around the world gathered in Jerusalem. The

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<sup>5</sup> James 3.5-6, 9-10

spectrum of skin colors is wonderful. African bodies standing next to Asian bodies, white bodies standing shoulder to shoulder with Middle Eastern bodies. Those Rwandan bodies took Apostles Anglican into their province in 2006. I cannot think about the racial wounds on these shores apart from the Church pictured in our narthex. That image shapes the way I live as a Christian here in America.

Our identity is in Pentecost. The Holy Spirit made us one on Pentecost. So let us grieve with our brothers and sisters of color who grieve in these days. Let us pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spiring upon all flesh to heal our land.

I join the dream of Bishop Seraphim Sigrist who said:

What if humanity came together in the light and spirit poured out at Pentecost? Would it not be possible to become of one heart and mind and to discover a unity in the language of the heart taught by the (Holy) Spirit, to make that society without fragmentation of which the ancients of Babylon dreamed? In such a society all people would find their place, neither lost in the collective, nor alienated and alone outside it. <sup>6</sup>

Neither lost, nor alienated. But all together in one place. And not just together, but together in peace and joy with the burning flame of the Holy Spirit, ever kindling new love for one another, and most of all, love for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Bishop Seraphim Sigrist, *A Life Together*, 27.