

## ***Fresh Air and Fire, Pentecost***

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May 31, 2020, Portions of Acts 2:2-21

Pentecost is one of my favorite Sundays of the year. I know that sets me apart from the crowd when I rank it up there with Christmas and Easter! It is a day to be bold. We Presbyterians usually shy away from talking about the Spirit, particularly when it involves flames and loud winds. We are more subtle people than that. Pentecost is that day you can shake off your inhibitions and talk about the SPIRIT in capital letters!!! I have found that Pentecost is an opportunity to do something different -- change it up a bit. I knew that this Pentecost would not be like any other Pentecost. I had no clue how different we were talking. I did not realize that we would be reeling from such a week as this. When I asked you last Sunday, to submit pictures of action and wind and flames, I never imagined that the whimsical pictures of Pentecost would be superimposed by the pictures implanted in our brains of our cities burning in destruction and that we'd be haunted by the phrase, "I can't breathe." This Sunday more than ever we need to be reminded of the power of the Holy Spirit whose winds of change are greater than airborne diseases, and fires of tongues are more life-changing than the fires of hatred, prejudice and destruction. . . A reading from Acts 2: portions of 1-21

**The Coming of the Holy Spirit --** 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. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard the others speaking in their own native language. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

**Peter Addresses the Crowd --** But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,...

before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

When I read this scripture, I realize that we are seeing the results of an amazing road that the disciples have already travelled. I also realize that the Jews who are witnessing it may not have the context from which they come. There are two different perspectives going on here. The followers of Jesus have lived with and been fed with the words of Jesus for the past three years. Their eyes have been opened to a new way of looking at things and a new relationship with God. It doesn’t mean that they understand all what Jesus taught them. We have read about how the disciples do not always get that Jesus is trying to say even up to Jesus’ last words on earth. Even with being average students of Jesus at best, they come to this day of Pentecost still as followers ready for the next steps, even if they do not know where those steps will lead.

As the winds and fires appear, they respond in a way that changes them forever. No longer are we left wondering if Peter and Thomas have what it takes to continue the movement that Jesus started. Peter, the fisherman, steps out and preaches God’s message in a way that only we preachers can dream about. This is a crossroads for the disciples. They can view their lives in terms of whom they were before Pentecost, and whom they are following the winds and flames. Their time with Jesus has prepared them for this moment.

There are other witnesses. The crowd of Jews. It is a diverse group. Because of the long and difficult Jewish history of being conquered by other nations. These Jews have come from all over. They have been immersed in different cultures and peoples, and yet their hearts belong to Jerusalem. They have not been with Jesus for the past three years and they have not witnessed the appearances of

Jesus following his death and resurrection. They have not walked with Jesus, so their context of experiencing these Jews from Galilee speaking to them in their native tongues, is to dismiss them -- to write them off as crackpots, lone wolves, drunkards. The people in the crowd turn away from this pivotal life-changing act because they see it as a onetime event. To them this moment begins as a mild disruption in their lives. But that is not the full story. Let me continue in Acts **2:37-42**

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?” 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. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Out of flames and wind the church is born.

We are right now experiencing an airborne disease and the flames of cities burning. By no means am I saying that Covid-19 and the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer is the Holy Spirit in action. The Spirit is here among us when we are cut to the heart with sadness, loss and tragedy. The Spirit is ready to move us. It is the Spirit that works with us to right the wrongs of injustice, which has taken years to create. These moments are life-changing events and cannot be dismissed as temporary disruptions.

Through this time of the virus, I know I have changed. One place where I have changed is in my prayer life during this time of Covid-19. As I continue to pray for individuals, I am more mindful of Communities. I pray for the church community beyond the walls. Our community of people who are out of work. Our community of students who feel lost and isolated as they try to learn. Our community as a nation as we seek guidance and leadership, and our world community who is moaning in pain and brokenness as a human race. I pray for patience and to resist the urge to follow the quick fixes whether for the pandemic or for our dealing with our systemic racism. This pandemic has starkly showed us the disparagement of our economic classes. It has revealed to us how vulnerable groups of people do not have the luxury to say “no” to work because it might be unsafe. We see the disproportionate amount of people of color and

the elderly who fall ill with Covid-19 and they have little voice in the decisions that are made. I pray for myself to understand the anger and frustration of systemic racism and the part that I have unwittingly played to perpetuate it.

The flames of Pentecost are present in this disruption of our lives. I know the Spirit will continue to work with us. I do not completely understand to know how we can heal the gaping wounds of the past but I do know we cannot cover them over or think they can be solved quickly and easily.

Last week before the death of George Floyd, Rev. William Barber, head of the Poor People's campaign was one of the preachers at the Festival of Homiletics. He spoke about the economic and racial wounds that cannot be covered over with simple patch and think we have solved them. It takes healing from down deep and inside the wound. Using the passage from Jeremiah 8, as he said, "We do not need a Band-Aid, we need a balm" (b a l m) (he spelled it out so there would be no misunderstanding!). We need a true healing that takes time and effort.

We have been brought to our knees with a thing called the virus. We are in a place where nothing is sure. Well almost nothing. Although my prayers and my faith in God has changed over this time, God has not. God's promise to all continues through all of this. As our hearts are heavy and are to the breaking point, the Holy Spirit is with us and that Spirit is with those who are trying to bring order from the chaos. That Spirit is with those whose frustration is boiling over; God's promise of the Spirit is with us today as we search, question and change.

Three thousand people heard the message of the disciples and did not dismiss it or think it was a trick. Three thousand people opened their hearts and did not treat what they heard as a one-time phenomenon. Three thousand people were willing to listen to the story from which the disciples came and accepted it as their own. As a result, the flames and air were taken into their hearts and they were irrevocably changed. And so, the church begins. It moves from a small band of followers to people of diverse cultures and nations who were willing to hear what was behind the wind and the fire.

That opportunity is here for us today. We, as a people, have changed from three months ago. Our experience, our habits, our priorities, and our lives are changed. Will our hearts be changed as well? Are we willing to listen and learn from those around us who are hurting and crying out in pain? May God move us and change us in ways we can't even begin to imagine. Tell me, what are your prayers like today?

Thanks be to God, Amen