

Sermon: God is Fire  
The Day of Pentecost, Year A  
Acts 2:1-21, 1 Cor.12:3b-13, John 20:19-23

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*Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them.*

Fire. It can be a beautiful thing and a terrifying thing. Fire can keep us warm when cold surrounds us. It can heat our food. A candle lit dinner can set a tone for romance. And a firefighter will tell you that fire can begin to wreak destruction in a few short seconds. Fire can be used for good and it can be a weapon for evil.

In Scripture fire often connotes the presence or judgment of God, used as a means to reconcile the evil deeds of human beings, when they have failed to take care of God's creation. You remember in Exodus (3) the Lord's angel appearing to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush and God appearing to the Israelites as a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13.21) as they flee Egypt. God is described as a "consuming fire" in both Deuteronomy (4.24) and the book of Hebrews (12.29). And Malachi (3.2) describes God as a "refiner's fire." Then in both Matthew (3.11) and Luke's (3.16) Gospels John the Baptist says that Jesus will baptize by the Holy Spirit and fire.

In today's reading from the Book of Acts, fire shows up in a powerful way to represent the divine presence through the Holy Spirit. We celebrate this manifestation of the Holy Spirit on this Day of Pentecost as one of our major feast days. God is here! God is with us! God is alive! Here the disciples are gathered together, "they were all in one place" and "suddenly from heaven there came a sound like a 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. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

This strange occurrence left everyone scratching their heads. Huh? What is going on here? People of many nations were there, hearing a message of God's deeds of power in their own languages from some small town uneducated men. Some were amazed and astonished; but cynics were saying "they must be drunk!" Then Peter goes on to interpret for them what God is up to – that God had promised that in these last days he would pour out his Spirit on *all* flesh, on sons and daughter, slaves and free, young and old – God's Spirit will be poured out on *all* flesh.

In our First Corinthians reading the apostle Paul writes, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good," and goes on to list many spiritual gifts. And in John's Gospel reading, Jesus says that his disciples are to continue his work, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit shows up loud and clear in our readings for today. No "still, small voice" on this day!

We have been given a gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit. So what are we going to do with it? Can we perceive that flicker of God's fire within us when our hearts leap at the arrival of a new born baby, or we hear the voice of a loved one on the other end of the phone, or

are our hearts strangely warmed when someone forgives us for no good reason? Does a work of music or a particular painting lift our hearts to another world? Do our hearts burn when we perceive an injustice. Maybe your heart is stirred when you hear of millions in our own country who cannot afford health insurance or millions in the distant Sudan who are enduring war and famine? Or when you realize we have neglected our environment? Is your heart stirred when you know it is time to speak up and you are a little afraid? Our hearts can be moved by both joy and fear. God moves within us all the time and often we simply fail to perceive it. Thomas Merton writes that “(God) is closer to us than we are to ourselves, although we do not see him.”

Bizzy Lane gave me a child’s book this past week called *Images of God* written by Marie-Helene Delval. I want to read to you one short page,

God is Fire  
When we open our hearts and our lives to God  
We receive a fire that gives light and warmth  
But also a fire that burns.  
And that can be a little scary.  
But God’s fire doesn’t destroy anything  
Except what is bad, failed, broken, rotten  
It is a good fire with a flame that purifies us.

What does it take to open our hearts and our lives to God? God’s flame is resting on each of us, even now. This is what God has promised us, the gift of the Holy Spirit. We simply have to acknowledge it and receive it for things to happen. We are given this fire so that we can share this light and warmth with the world that so desperately needs it. Where do you perceive a dark corner of the world where your gifts are needed? How can you express solidarity with the oppressed? Where are you called to heal or to bridge a gap?

This story in Acts is about the launching of God’s mission in the world and how the Holy Spirit works through people (you and me!) to bring the message of God’s love to the world. So let’s just pause for a moment and think about what burns in your heart that God can use through you to bring his life-giving light to others.

Just as the disciples and many others were gathered in one place, and flames of fire rested on each, I want you to imagine God’s fire resting on you and upon every other person in this room. Because it is.

*God of fire, fan the flames of love in our hearts that we might bring light and the warmth of love and justice to a hurting world. Open us to the ways in which we can use our gifts to your glory. Help us to not be afraid and to trust in the leading of your Holy Spirit. Amen.*