

**“THE DAY THE CHURCH CAUGHT FIRE ....”**

**Text: “And there appeared among them tongues,  
as of fire, resting on each one of them. And they  
were all filled with the Holy Spirit....”**

**Acts 2:3-4a**

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Today, the minds of most of us are and should be on Mothers' Day, a time to honor the Mothers here today, and to honor those who are blessed memories to lean upon; but also those who in God's good time filled the part as mother to those who needed them. "You have been like a Mother to me," is high praise indeed. I read in the Charlotte Observer yesterday that a stay-at-home-Mom's salary, if she could find someone to give it to her, is \$107,000 per year. That is still not enough, but it might be a good start for those on whom the future of the world depends. I had originally planned to preach a soft and cuddly sermon titled "In Praise of Women," which would have got me many points as husband of one woman, brother of two, father of three, and Grandfather of one young woman.

But, with our accomplished Confirmation Class being received into membership today, as well as the introduction of New Members, I thought I might be beat a little retreat, and preach on Pentecost, the ecclesiastical holiday which is also celebrated today, and which is so nicely highlighted by the new red Pentecost Parament hanging from the pulpit, which was made for Sharon Church by kindly and competent Mary Jo Alley. So all you women and mothers will have to wait for another day; and sadly I shall not be in receipt of all those personal points from the seven women who are such an integral and blessed part of my life.

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"The Day the Church Caught Fire..." My title sounds ominous, but that is what happened on the first Pentecost Sunday, the Church caught fire. Be careful, I am not speaking about the church building they were in: in fact they didn't have a building at all. I mean the people of the Christ caught fire; and that is where the real church is anyway. Theologian Emil Brunner chided a long time ago that one of the worst confusions of the faithful is that we tend to confuse our individual church buildings with The Church, which is unbounded by bricks and mortar. It lives in the hearts and lives of Christian people. So you might say that where Jesus Christ is, there is the church, as opposed to saying that the church is the place where Jesus Christ is. That kind of distinction is being made this year at our General Assembly in a revision of our Statement of Faith. Professor Merwyn Johson, active here at Sharon with his family, is a key member of that Reforming our Mission committee. We should be very proud of Dr. Johnson. As Archbishop Temple once said "It is a mistake to assume that God is solely, or even chiefly, interested in the things we call religious."

Anyway, let me tell you about what happened on the first Pentecostal Sunday, 2000 years ago. It was fifty days after Easter, about mid to late May. (Easter was early this year.) That is what the Greek word Pentecost means: fifty: ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty days after Jesus came back from the dead. They were gathered for a Jewish holiday. Pentecost was, and is, one of the three great Jewish Festivals of the year. They came together to celebrate the Festival of Weeks, fifty days after Passover in the Jewish calendar, a time to thank God for his blessings and to bring their offerings to the Temple.

Jesus did not alert his disciples that the spirit would be given on a holiday weekend, although it might be more than a coincidence that the Crucifixion took place on or near Passover. Our Lord

had promised the disciples only that the Holy Spirit (i.e., the Third Person of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit) would come upon them after he was gone: to comfort, guide and guard and challenge them.

It might be a little skittish for technically-minded Bible readers, because John wrote in his Gospel that the disciples had already received the Spirit in an earlier post-resurrection appearance. John 20:22 says that Jesus appeared to them on Easter evening, somehow arriving through a locked door, bolted shut because they were afraid that the authorities might arrest them. When he came in, The Risen Christ said immediately, “Peace be with you.” Then he showed them the nail prints on his hands and the wound in his side, and he said, “As the father has sent me, so send I you.” Finally it says, apropos of our sermon: “He breathed on them saying, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.” And they did. In both renditions they received the breath of God and the power of the Spirit.

But, to get back to Acts 2 and Pentecost: they were gathered together in one place. The Bible says that “suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them.” Talk about a vivid and memorable image. When Jesus had ascended into heaven ten days earlier, he promised them that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them,” to give them grace and guidance to become effective witnesses in their own communities, then around the nation, and finally to the ends of the earth.

In John, Chapter 14, Jesus also promised that the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who would come in his name, would teach and guide and guard them after he was gone. Here he was; he breathed spiritual life into them, which was exactly what they needed. So down and discouraged and out of breath in their grief and uncertainty as to what to do next: this was the life-saver, it gave them life and purpose.

It is reminiscent of course of the day of Creation back in Genesis Two where it says, “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and He breathed into the man’s nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7) Eve was created a little later when poor Adam became lonely and God had to make a helpmeet for him.

Prior to that, before God breathed his life into them, they were nowhere near the image of the reflection of the Creator God. It does not matter whether you believe in Creationism as a seven day creation or whether you believe in the evolutionary origin of Homo sapiens, the same is true. (While it might matter to you personally, it does not matter to our point here.) Either way, at the beginning there was this creature standing before the Lord called Adam, which means man. He looked real, as a little later Eve would look like a woman; but it was not so. They were masquerading as if they were the real thing. They walked and talked and held hands and ate and drank and slept and all the other things which animals and humans do.

But they were no more than make-believe people, walking mannequins, until “God breathed his life into them,” almost like a heavenly mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and ipso facto, they became real live people, made in the image of God, after his likeness. Are you with me? What

brought authentic life into the created human being in the first place was the breath of God, the ruah in Hebrews.

Now, (are you listening?) that is an exact parallel to what happened on Pentecost in the Acts Two and what must always happen to you and me and all God's children everywhere come each and every Pentecost. Back at the beginning of creation they looked like the real thing, but they weren't. They appeared to be the real McCoy; but they were just walking animals, or lumps of clay molded into the shape of bona fide people, until God breathed his life into them.

In the gathering place we read about in Acts 2, they, the disciples, were all there together. All the Christians that there were, were there. If they failed it would all come to naught. Now, that morning, they would have called themselves believers, and most of them could have been, although their doubts and their fears and their forsaking Jesus might call that into question. If asked, they might have replied sure, they were Christians. They said their prayers and helped each other and told their stories about Jesus. But something was missing. Something enormously important was missing. What was it?

Watch the parallel directly: As the first creatures on earth did not become the Imago Dei, the Image of God, until God breathed his breath into them, so that little group of disciples on Pentecost, huddled together in a room: troubled, lonely, afraid and lost, could not and never would be the chosen vessels of the Lord, unless and until the promised Holy Spirit came down and entered them, just as the original breath of God gave them life; they had to wait upon the Holy Spirit to breath the life of the Risen Christ into them. It came down like the sound of a rushing wind and the tongues of fire rested on each one, one at a time, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. At that moment, in their lives and in ours, they/we become not only living beings, but living vessels through which God can and will do his work. Without that they would have been like toy soldiers lined up across the table from the enemy but incapable of doing any battle whatsoever without the hand and power of their Master.

So it is in each and every generation. You have a lot of people going through the motions. They go to services; they cough up a few shekels here and there as it is convenient; they wear their badges to Church. But what gave those disciples new life and the power to work wonders was not their skills or their education or their experience (in fact they had little of each.) It was not their determination or their strategic planning or their long range goals. It was nothing more but nothing less, than the gift of the power and peace of the Holy Spirit. Unless and until that same fire and spirit comes down on the people in the pews, to each one, one by one, no church, no Session, no individual will ever find the power to turn the world upside down, as they complained about St. Paul.

Oh, the gathered community through the years often looks as if they have made it; sometimes they act as if they have made it on their own. They will gad about as if they were the prime package Grade A instruments of Jesus Christ. They sing praises to God, albeit timidly at times. They get all riled up debating each other over secondary matters of the Church: like denominational idiosyncrasies and local customs and rituals and how it used to be, getting all worn out with non-essential fanfare. They will sit around respectfully, reciting the same old creeds and remember the way things used to be.

Oh, they rally round each other, some of the time – any and all of which is good - but they will forever zig and zag and spin wheels and run around in circles, tending the same old fires, harboring the same old grudges, coughing up the same old grievances, until the rushing wind blows out their homemade fires. Then, the fire of the Holy Spirit can touch them and raise them up and fire them off to follow the Risen Christ, never to hanker after their own plans and purposes and patterns again. (Are you listening?) That’s what happens when the Spirit of God comes down: God’s people are set on fire!

We do not have the time today to talk much about what happened next, although we can come back to that some other day if you like. But once the power of the spirit and the rushing wind and fire take over your life, you can never be sure what will happen next. It can be strange and unpredictable. In this case, “They began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” The whole crowd around them outside in the Temple square was bewildered because each one heard what the disciples were saying in his and her own language. As if a United Nations speech was being translated simultaneously to the hundreds of men and women around the hall, each in his own language. And they spoke in tongues and they jumped up and down and they got themselves in trouble. It got confusing. The Bible says those outside were perplexed, (no wonder) and they said to each other “What does this mean?” But some of those standing by were more certain; they sneered, saying that the disciples were drunk on wine. (Acts 2:13)

As an aside Simon Peter then raised his voice and told the crowd that they could not possibly be drunk, because it was only nine o’clock in the morning. It might be a good argument, even if I have met a few stalwarts who would refute it by their actions. In fact one friend of mine up north admits that men get up and go fishing at dawn as an excuse to start drinking early; others say that is when the fish bite. I don’t know. But I suppose Peter knew what he was talking about, for when he finished his following sermon, which takes up the remainder of Acts Two, Luke says that 3000 people were baptized on the spot and the chapter ends by saying, “The Lord added to their number day by day, those who were being saved.” What a story.

\*\*\*\*\*INTERLUDE\*\*\*\*\*

(At this time in the sermon, Dr. Cromie asked the worshippers to take the balloons which had been distributed to each person as they came into the Sanctuary. The pastor instructed those present, including the choir, to hold the balloon in their hands and to look at it. Then he asked them to imagine that the balloon is a person, that it has a name, their name. He looked at his balloon and said, “Hello Richard.”

As it sits there in the hand it does not seem to be worth very much. There is not much you can do with a collapsed balloon. It just stays there. But then you blow it up, as parallel to the breath of God being breathed into you and me, just watch what happens. (At this point Dr. Cromie asked those who wished and would to blow up their balloons and pretend that it was symbolic of the breath of God filling up a human life, their lives.)

Then the people were asked to hold the balloon up in front of them, now filled with the symbolic breath of God, and to think of all the things they could do with it if they wanted to. Like, you could tie a string around it and use it for a party; or hang it on your mailbox so people would know where the party was. It could even be a symbol of the celebration of Pentecost (The balloons were all red, of course.) Or, you could tie it tightly at the neck and bounce it around. Some children could even use it to challenge their younger brothers. You could tie it and then leave in the pew, and come back the next Sunday. But if you deposit it in your pew and leave it here, it will soon lose all of its zip and return to the collapsed balloon it was in the first place.

Or, you could blow it up and hold it tight in front of you, but not tie it with a string, just pinch it. Then you could raise your hand up in the air and let it go. It will fly, for a while. There is no way to tell which way it will go, but it will probably zig zag this way and that. (Dr. Cromie then released his balloon, and sure enough, it shot off into the air and zig zagged for a while.) It might even land on your neighbor's head. I hope not... One thing is sure: the fuller the balloon is with the symbolic breath, the farther it will fly if you let it go off on its own. It will not last forever, but it will sure be more exciting to watch it sailing on the wind, than to sit still there in your pew.

The same is true with our Christian lives. The more power of the Spirit and the more we allow God to breathe his Spirit into us, the more exciting our faith will be and the more it will be noticed. And even if some people say, as some said that first Pentecost morning: "Look how crazy those Christians are down at Sharon Church; they will try almost anything in praise of the Lord Jesus Christ. They have the fire of the Spirit in the way they worship, the way they serve each other, and the way they reach out to the needy people of the world."

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But, back to the first Pentecost. When it all happened, the wind and the fire and all, notice that Luke says that each person present was filled with the Holy Spirit. Filled: what a perfect verb, what a perfect reminder. You and I are like empty vessels. We have to be filled with something. We were made to be in communion with God. There is an emptiness, an opening there, a longing, a restless mind and an empty heart. If you must be filled with something, why not allow yourself to be filled with the right thing. If you refuse to be filled with the loveliest and best that life can offer, you will be forever overflowing with the weak and tawdry things that float freely through the atmosphere, like germs and viruses and leeches, looking for somewhere to land and someone to occupy. Goodness knows how easily God's children can get filled up with power and money and sex and compromises and all the rest.

But, if you stop long enough to allow the Spirit of Christ to fill you, your cup will run over, as the Psalmist said it would. If the Lord is your Shepherd, then you will be safe and secure and competent to handle whatever life serves up to you and yours. For when those times come when you cannot manage it by yourself, the Spirit will reach out and touch you and take your hand to help you and lead you on.

Notice also that when the fire came down, it says clearly that the tongues of fire came to rest on each one of them. It does not say that it was an outstanding sermon which everybody liked. It says the tongues of fire rested on each one, one by one. It did not float down as a plastic

tarpaulin or a fishing net to cover the whole room with Grace. It was aimed individually to those who were there, like a rifle not a shotgun. The Spirit did not miss a single one of them. Not that everyone received the same gift and guidance. The Bible is quite clear about how there are a variety of gifts and needs and abilities. But they caught the fire one by one.

Not all were willing and able to let the fire touch and change their lives, but enough of them got the message. I see that in worship all the time. God's rich blessing is everywhere for everyone. God does not choose favorites. He does have certain people to do certain tasks. But the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. So does the offer to allow the spirit to lend you his fire. But it is not a delivery en masse, where you have to scratch and struggle and wrestle it away from others, like hungry humans in Myanmar just now after the devastation following the cyclone, scrambling for some tiny morsel of food for the blessings. The Spirit's blessing is meant just for you. It is all yours, all mine and all his and all hers and all theirs.

Over the years some people write to thank me for the blessing they have received in a service where I preached. I got a couple of notes these past few weeks from you at Sharon. One wrote that she was touched and said how much I helped her – that is a pastor's dream fulfilled. But then she added, "I thought you were speaking directly to me. It was as if you had singled me out for that special word of encouragement." I used to scrutinize my sermon manuscripts to see what had been said. When I was younger I even joked about it; like you should hear what I said. But now I quietly smile and say, "Thank you Lord." Sometimes what the person says I said is not what I said. It is what the person heard, from the Lord.

What I do know after all these years is that whatever you need, Christ will offer to give it to you, if you open up the vessel of your heart and mind and soul to receive it. As they spoke at Pentecost, those all around the Temple Grounds heard the message in their own language. (I do not mean to belittle the miracle of speaking in tongues mentioned by Luke, although St. Paul belittled it later on.) What it means here is that The Spirit translated the words floating through the air from the chancel and interpreted them to the myriad of individual and their needs all around. That is what every preacher worth his salt prays for every Sunday, no matter what he or she says, the Spirit will make sure the people hear what they need to carry on. Billy Graham used to say that the more scripture he could include in a sermon the happier he was, for that gave the Spirit more opportunities to do the proper translation.

Paul wrote in Romans: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, and the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. "God, who searches the heart, knows what is in the mind of the Spirit and he knows what goes inside of us. That way the Spirit intercedes for you and me, according to the will of God." (Romans 8:26-27) We might not have it right, but the Spirit does. "Sighs too deep for words." I love it: i.e. The Holy Spirit understands our weakness. He knows what we mean when all we can do is sigh, or cry or fall exhausted in a heap. God knows what we want and need before we ask. He knows our mortal frame.

The Spirit is there to be our interpreter to God and God's interpreter to us, even when we do not know what to say or do on our own. So if you cannot form a fancy prayer and you do not know what to do or say next, take heart. The Spirit speaks to the Lord God and conveys what is on

your minds and He will relay how much we long to be instrumental in the time and providence of God. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out; but you do not need a rocket scientist to help you: the Spirit will figure it out for you.

I read somewhere not long ago that Erasmus the Christian scholar of the Renaissance and Reformation used a classic story to help make his point known to the children of the parish where he was preaching. It is a story and it goes like this: Jesus had finished his life on earth and had ascended into heaven. There was a time of great rejoicing as he told the angels and archangels what he had done and how he fulfilled the plans and purposes of God in his life and death and resurrection.

They were of course fascinated. But when he had finished the travelogue and all the angels were impressed and shouted Amen, Michael the Archangel stood up out of the crowd and said, "That is fine, dear Lord, but what happens next? How do you plan to share the news and make the whole wide world of earth a place of love and peace? How do you plan to spread the good news of the Gospel?"

The story did not say what Jesus felt about the question, but he answered: "No problem, not to worry. I have left my eleven disciples (Judas was gone already.) down there to carry on. And I have a handful of other followers, men and women and children who I entrusted with the message. They are in charge now. They will share the news. They will be faithful. The day will come in God's good time when all the earth will know the Message."

Archangel Michael respectfully interrupted and said, "But, Lord, what if they don't? What if they fail? What if they refuse to pay the price? What is your back up plan? Where is your Plan B?"

Jesus quietly responded, "I don't have one. I have no Plan B. I am counting on them to do the job and get it done.

"You don't have a back up Lord?" Michael added sheepishly, "that's a funny way to run a railroad."

"But Michael," Jesus replied, "I'm not trying to run a railroad; this is the Kingdom of God on earth we are speaking of. They can do it. I know they can. I am counting on them. If they get lost and need help, the Holy Spirit will find some way to re-invigorate them. He will melt them and mold them, fill them and use them, for now and forever more. Amen."

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