

May 28, 2023
Pentecost Sunday

When God Came Down Like Fire:
Week 1: He Breathed on Them

Scriptures: Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23, 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

This week begins a two-week sermon series called “When God Came Down Like Fire” and today is Pentecost Sunday. Traditionally, Pentecost is the “birthday celebration” as the beginning of the church. As we heard in the lesson from Acts that Joetta read, it was a life changing event for the disciples. This is what finally changed Peter from the Galilean fisherman to the leader of the Church that Jesus called him to be. As we heard in Pastor Rob's messages from the last seven weeks, it made him a formidable force, so much that he ended up in a Roman prison and a martyr for the sake of Christ.

When the disciples met on Pentecost, they probably weren't expecting much. They had been celebrating Pentecost all their lives. Pentecost was originally an agricultural festival celebrating the first harvest of the growing season. Later it became a commemoration of the giving of the land of Canaan to the people of Israel; and then even later, it morphed into an observance of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. All are important times of celebration, but the disciples were used to a low-key holiday. For us, it would be like comparing Easter or Christmas to Flag Day. Flag Day on June 14 comes and goes every year, but it doesn't get much attention or celebration.

The disciples were not expecting much; think about what they had been through and they were probably worn out from the roller-coaster of emotions. They had been through the Last Passover with Jesus, the total despair of his crucifixion followed by the total joy of his resurrection and being with him the next forty days, only to have him ascend back to heaven and left with two angels asking them why they were staring up into heaven. What was next? I wonder if any of them even remembered the words he had spoke to them at their last meal together and again in John 20:19-23.

At the last Passover Meal in John 14, Jesus had said “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things, and will remind you of everything that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid. - John 14:23-27 (NIV).” Jesus spoke many of the same words to them at the encounter after the resurrection. **Read John 20:19-23.**

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, it was definitely NOT peaceful! There was nothing to indicate the power that was unleashed on this day. The disciples found themselves in an encounter with God that literally blew them away.

The Day of Pentecost came like the sound of a violent wind. It was fire; it was power; it was chaos and noise, but it was also meaning, and it was hope. The disciples were

transformed from a group hiding behind closed doors in fear, to a group that received hope because the promised comforter had come. And then to be filled with the power to be, the power to grow, the power to love as Christ loved. That's what Pentecost is all about. It's not simply a birthday commemoration, just a marker along the road, a milestone passed. It is a moment of power, an offering of transformation.

In modern day expression, we would probably say "they were on fire for the Lord". I am sure many of you have heard that expression; I know I have, and honestly I find it more than a little scary. How would we all react this morning if the same thing happened right here? I don't know about you, but when the Holy Spirit comes, I am a lot more receptive to the Holy Spirit coming described in John 20:19-23. I want to hear the words "Peace be with you" and feel the warmth of Jesus breathing on me and saying "receive the Holy Spirit." As Cindy shared with the kids, fire can be a blaze or it can be a glowing ember. I enjoy sitting around the blazing campfire to visit with friends, but when it is time to cook the hamburgers, hotdogs, and s'mores, I only want the warm coals so I have edible food instead of burnt offerings. And I think that is the point of reading these two scriptures together – the Holy Spirit comes to believers in different ways that are mutually supportive and not mutually exclusive.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, was already a priest in the Church of England with an Oxford degree as part of credentials. Yet he felt something was missing. When he did experience the Holy Spirit at Aldersgate, he described it as his "heart became strangely warmed." While it may sound as if it was a sudden event, it really wasn't. In the mid-1730's, he and his brother Charles came to Georgia in the colonies with the intent of being missionaries to the Native Americans and that didn't happen. While in Georgia they encountered German Moravian Christians who had a quiet assurance of their faith and a deep spirituality that quite honestly, the brothers envied. When they returned to England having failed in their mission, they continued to seek out the Moravian Christians and their more simple worship meetings. In May 1738, Charles fell ill and there was concern that he would even survive the illness. Lying in bed day after day, he focused on his spiritual well-being. If this illness were to take his life, was he ready to die? He prayed, studied, and spoke to friends who prayed for him to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. At about the same time, brother John was having conversations with a well-respected Moravian pastor about Moravian spirituality, which included the belief that Christians have an assurance of faith experienced as love, peace, and joy. Those emotions were in short supply for each of the Wesley brothers at the time. Between conversations, John pored through the Bible for evidence of the Moravian pastor's claims.

On Pentecost Sunday, May 21, 1738, Charles had a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit. In his journal entry for that day, he reported experiencing "a strange palpitation of heart" that caused him to exclaim, "I believe, I believe!" Several sentences later he continues, "I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ." When John visited the next day, Charles shared what had happened for him and together they prayed for John to have a similar experience. Charles writes, "I

almost believed the Holy Ghost was coming upon him." Later that week, John "went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street" where his heart became "strangely warmed." It was a moment for which he had prayed, studied, and prepared. God's peace had come upon him, had breathed the Holy Spirit upon him, and he was ready to be sent as one of the most powerful preachers of the message of God's grace. He preached in the mines, the fields, and the pubs – anywhere that he felt the message of grace needed to be proclaimed.

So, does that bring us right back to the uncomfortable “being on fire for the Lord” or is there more to the story? I think there really is more – the stories of those the disciples had an impact on is closer to the feeling “strangely warmed” by the breath of God than being anointed with tongues of fire. Think about the story of Dorcas (Tabitha) told in Acts 9:36-42. She never preached to a crowd like Peter did, but when she fell ill, and died, the whole town was heartbroken. She made clothing for the widows and showed the compassion and love of Christ. They urged Peter to come and seeing their distress, Peter prayed and Dorcas was resurrected to continue to be a blessing to the believers and especially the widows.

When our hearts are warmed by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit takes over to bless those around us. In 1 Corinthians 12:3B-13, Paul describes Spirit-filled believers. ***Read 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13.***

The Holy Spirit is manifested in multiple ways, all for the common good. We may not see tongues of fire resting on believers' heads or hear rushing wind, but we can certainly recognize the peace that Spirit-filled members have and how they fulfill the directive from Jesus that he is sending us just as the Father sent him. I have been attending this church literally for 70 years and been a member for 58. I don't ever remember seeing tongues of flames on people, but can tell you the influence that spirit-filled people had on my life.

Brian Helman's great-grandmother, Florence Potts, taught Sunday School for countless years to the elementary age kids. She understood that hands-on learning made a lesson last and we looked forward to every Sunday's lesson with the flannelgraph board and being able to arrange the figures for the day's lesson on the flannel backgrounds draped on the board. She, Loveda Lovett, Mabel Hall, Grace Michael, and my dad, Vernon Hall, took the responsibilities of teaching Sunday School and Bible School to heart to make sure those growing up at New Hope learned the Bible.

No family who had a family member pass away went hungry because Janet Motter and her mother, Annabelle Ike, made sure that the best meals complete with homemade pies, were brought to the home and the dinner after the service. Sunday mornings were never silent as long as Marie Ike was there to sing, Luella Motter was there to play the piano, and Don and Olive Ann Heintz were there to lead the choir. The work of farming became a blessing to others when the men pitched in to harvest the crops of

an elderly couple, the Altons, after he had a stroke and couldn't bring in the crop. One year right after World War II, the members of the church who farmed each set aside one acre of their wheat fields and the grain from those acres was donated to CROP to feed the hungry in devastated Europe. I could give you many more examples of the servant saints, but the point is this – I grew up in a church that was led by spirit-filled people who understood the importance of using their spiritual gifts to support each other and to support the mission of the church to reach out to those beyond its walls who were hurting and needed the love and peace of Jesus. And it is my hope that fifty years from now the youngsters who are here today will be able to say the same thing.

If you go up 25A towards Anna, there is a church which has had something on their signboard for a month or so and I think about it even more every time I see it. It says “God expects spiritual fruits, not religious nuts.” I think there is a lot of truth to that – the Pharisees and Sadducees seemed more like the religious nuts of their day and the Holy Spirit-filled disciples delivered the spiritual fruits. When we spend time like the disciples and John and Charles Wesley did to prepare our hearts and minds to be receptive to Jesus breathing on us, the Holy Spirit fills us and allows us to develop the spiritual fruits God intends. We can't control when or where God puts the Holy Spirit in our lives, but we can study, pray, and be in fellowship with other believers so we are in a place where we will be ready when it happens.

Let us pray:

God of wind and flame: warm our hearts this morning as we celebrate the explosion of your Holy Spirit coming into the world on the Day of Pentecost! Remind us that the gift you gave that day was not just the gift to speak in different tongues, but also the gift of hearing and comprehension. May your Holy Spirit keep us attuned to the voices all around us, to those who need us to be bearers of your love and compassion, and may the spiritual gifts we are blessed with be used through your church to meet those needs. In the holy name of Jesus we pray. Amen.