

Pentecost (B)  
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Text: Acts 2:1-21

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As some of the people arrested for storming the US Capitol on January 6 have gone to court, it's been interesting to hear some of their excuses for rioting and taking part in an attempt to overthrow the United States government. Some of them have claimed that they didn't travel to Washington DC with the intention to do that. Instead, they were caught up in the spirit of the moment. They were carried away by the lies and the anger all around them. There was a story about a defendant whose lawyer argued that his client's behavior came from a bad case of what the lawyer called "Fox-news-itis." He had been listening to all of the lies on Fox News about the election being stolen, and was completely taken over by it. His better judgment was simply swept away.

While I don't believe that getting caught up in the spirit of something completely erases any individual's personal responsibility, it is true that if everyone around you is caught up in something, it's easy for the same thing to happen to you. And I am genuinely concerned about the sort of spirit that is alive in our country and moving so many of our fellow citizens. It is a deeply fearful spirit. Conservatives are run by fear of the liberal agenda, and liberals are run by fear of what the conservatives are doing to our nation. And nothing good will come from meeting each other with fear, and working our fear out on each other. The spirit that is moving our country also seems to be a very angry spirit. That kind of spirit makes it easy to lash out at perceived enemies, and be unable to recognize them as neighbors. The spirit of our times is also extremely self-centered, and entitled. I tend to think advertising contributes to this, but we all feel the push that comes from within and from all around us to look to our own wants and desires first of all, and to protect our own interests. When moved by this kind of spirit, neighbors become completely invisible, and we don't see them at all.

This morning I want to invite you to recognize how you have opened your heart to a very different sort of spirit. You have opened your heart to the spirit of Jesus—a spirit of forgiveness and compassion, a spirit of gentleness and humility and generosity, a spirit of welcome and mercy. The spirit of Jesus is a healing presence in our lives. The Bible describes this kind of spirit as holy spirit—it is nothing other than the power and presence of God. And when we open our lives to this spirit, when we are caught up with holy spirit, we become a force for healing and peace in all our relationships. When we are so centered in Jesus' love, his spirit shapes our priorities and values, so that we really do see our neighbors, especially the ones who are hurting. They're not invisible any longer, when we are caught up with a spirit that is truly loving and caring, not destructive. That is the spirit of God at work in our lives and relationships.

Our reading from Acts this morning gives us a strange, rather unsettling image of what holy spirit looks like. It was like tongues of fire on the heads of Jesus' followers, empowering them to do things they never imagined they could do. I don't hear Luke's image of tongues of fire as a literal description of little dancing flames—because I can't imagine anyone who was listening to those disciples hearing even a single word they said if their attention was drawn to this bizarre

little fire, burning where it shouldn't be. Instead, I hear Luke's image as a way of trying to picture what the inner feeling of that day was for Jesus' followers. To them, it felt like the warmth and urgency of fire, something powerful and undeniable. They felt the spirit of Jesus moving them out of their fear, moving them beyond their own self-protection, to share what they had with others. And what they had that day was the message that through Jesus, God is healing the human family to forgive us and make us whole.

I wonder if you've ever felt anything like what those first disciples felt on that Pentecost day. If you're like me, you'd probably say "No" because of the strangeness of the tongues of fire, and maybe also because of the speaking in other languages thing. But as I've been thinking about this really odd story this week, it made me wonder whether there are experiences that any of us could relate to that are experiences of holy spirit, when the spirit of Jesus was burning brightly in our lives.

One of the first things that comes to mind for me about fire is that it is powerful. We have a gas fireplace in our front room, and we can turn it on when the house feels a little chilly around the edges. Then, when we're ready to call it a night, with a push of a button, the fire goes out. But it's not that way with a real fire. It is a force. And it's the same way with the spirit of Jesus in our lives. When we have really caught Jesus' vision of love as the only power capable of healing the human family, and the only power capable of making our own lives meaningful and significant, that power will begin to exert itself in our lives. It will grow, and it will make us a force for healing and compassion in all our relationships.

One of the gifts of being a pastor is that I have been blessed to know many people over the years who have been a force for love. Their lives burned with passion and gentleness and insistence. They loved the people of their community, the children in their church, the hungry people in their neighborhood, they loved God's beautiful creation. And that love was so powerful that it had to show up in actions, in serving, in generosity, in paying attention to people that others overlooked. And I wonder if you feel that same fire burning in you. That is holy spirit—nothing less than the power and presence of God at work in your life.

Another thing that comes to mind for me about fire is that it gives light. When our electricity went out during the ice storm a few months ago, I was really thankful for all of the candles we could set out on the table. They made a wonderful warm glow, and we could see to find our way around the house without tripping over anything. And it's the same way with the spirit of Jesus in our lives. When we attend to Jesus' word, when we let Jesus' values of forgiveness and compassion and generosity and humility shape our lives, they will serve as a light to help us find our way through a dark and dangerous world. Jesus' way of love helps us reliably find our way in life, helps us really see our neighbors, helps us see that we are all children of God.

As the community of Jesus, we strive to live our whole lives in the warm glow of that light. Part of what we do every Sunday is open our hearts to scripture, to let the words of Jesus and wisdom of Jesus become light for our path. We try to catch the spirit of Jesus together, and nurture that spirit in our shared life. Even though we are spread all across the city, all across the

country, we are really with each other online. We are a community, sharing the spirit of love together to illumine our lives. I know how important this community has been through these months of pandemic isolation, to bring light into all our lives. That is holy spirit—nothing less than the power and presence of God in our lives.

The final thing that comes to mind for me about fire is how it can burn things up. We saw that last summer with the terrible wildfires in Oregon and across the west. People's homes, whole communities, were just wiped away. And there's a way in which the spirit of Jesus is like that too. When Jesus' values of forgiveness and love begin to burn in our hearts, they will burn up resentments and grudges and selfishness. When Jesus' values of humility and generosity are burning within us, they will burn up arrogance and stinginess. And maybe most importantly, when Jesus' love and forgiveness get through to us so that we know we are part of God's beloved creation, and individually we are God's treasured, forgiven children, that has power to burn away all our insecurities and fear, any worry that we're not enough. It has power to burn away any guilt or shame or unworthiness.

For each and every one of us, what greater treasure could there be but to be given our lives back, burned clean and pure of all the junk that goes on in our heads and hearts that distracts us and diverts us from living the life God most desires for us—a life of love and compassion and generosity. That is holy spirit. That is the power and presence of God burning in our lives to set us truly free to be God's people, truly free for a genuinely human life. That is the Holy Spirit—nurturing the love and grace of God in our hearts.

Dear people of God, the spirit of Jesus, the very presence and power of God, is already at work in your lives. It may not be visible as a little tongue of fire on top of your head. But it is visible in the way you act with generosity and compassion for neighbors in need. It's visible in how you care for your children. It's visible in the ways you work for racial justice. It's visible in how you care for the earth. And so much more! All of that comes from the spirit of Jesus, God's Holy Spirit, alive and active in our relationships, in our community, in our hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen