

**“THE CHURCH ON FIRE”**

**Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17**

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I don't think I have ever been more aware of the power of the natural world than I am right now. The litany of natural events that have wrecked havoc on the world in recent memory includes hurricanes, earthquakes, forest fires, mud slides, flooding, and wind storms. When I worked for the Facilities Department at Pacific School of Religion during seminary, there was a laundry list of safety requirements that were born in the aftermath of the Oakland hills fire of the early 1990s. In Spokane folks still talk about the missing trees and the damage done by the ice storm of the late 1990s, and my in-laws have recently returned from participating in a relief mission to the Gulf Coast where Hurricane Katrina left a path of cataclysmic devastation as a reminder of its power. Even in the midst of our technologically advanced age, we often find ourselves unable to predict and unprepared to deal with the effects of nature's immense power. I don't think I am alone in confessing that nature's power leaves me sometimes feeling like a piñata on a string—just waiting to feel the almost random wallop of a stick to the side.

In many ways, I think it is our recent experience with nature's power, the piñata-effect if you will, that brings me to the events of Pentecost with a newly opened mind. I must admit that sometimes I have come to Pentecost and rolled my eyes a bit, thinking “a violent rush of wind as if from heaven” and “tongues of fire”...whatever. This is surely just another one of those moments in the Bible where the writers have painted a visual picture or used metaphor in an effort to convince us of the power of God. I believe, already! Stop trying to hit me over the head! But this year there is something different because of that laundry list of natural acts. This year, I need Pentecost to be one of those miracle moments and not just some natural act that a biblical writer had to find a way of explaining. This year, when thousands are mourning after another earthquake—this time in Java—while entire sections of New Orleans still remain without power—at the beginning of THIS year's hurricane season, this year that rushing wind and those tongues of fire as set by God seem almost like a relief. The thought that they are an announcement from God and that no one is burned or bowled over or left homeless in their path—this year, I have no problem believing in the Pentecost event.

The Pentecost story in Acts is really a story told in three parts; and in each part there is something about the nature of our relationship with the divine that I think is critical to consider as we celebrate Pentecost Sunday. First we have the arrival of the Holy Spirit which is announced in verses 1-3.

*"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."*

This part of the Pentecost event is important because it provides a detail of the Holy Spirit's arrival. What I find interesting about the Holy Spirit's coming is that the "helper"—here the Spirit is defined in Ezekiel—comes with both audio and visual elements, which makes the Holy Spirit the perfect part of the Trinity for those who need Dolby Surround Sound from the Holy One. I think the Holy Spirit is the perfect incarnation of the Holy for those of us with limited attention spans, for the ADD among us, for the MTV generation, for Generation X, Y, and beyond. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is the beat poet—the rock and roll version, the Technicolor 3D version of the Holy—that explodes off the page of our bibles and into our lives. In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is loud and powerful, vibrant and alive. Make no mistake though, amid the wind and flame the Holy Spirit is still a revelation of all that is holy. The passage today tells us that the Holy Spirit's arrival occurs "from heaven," which announces that the followers of Jesus are not simply under the influence of wine, but instead are experiencing the presence of the Holy in a new form: in this case, in the form of a divinely inspired show of color and sound, of heavenly winds and inspired tongues of fire.

The second part of this passage stretches from verses 4-11 and in it we see the reversal of the Tower of Babel story as those who were once separated by varied languages are now able to speak together and be understood.

Just to review what happened at Babel in Genesis 11: “It is written that the whole earth had one language and the same words and they settled in the land of Shinar. There they made bricks and mortar and began to build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. As they built they did so with an eye toward making a name for themselves. When the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the Lord noted that as one people with one language there would be nothing that was impossible for them.” Of course, this brought up the question, “Why then would they need the Lord?” “So the Lord went down and confused their language so that they could not understand one another’s speech. And then the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”

That was the text from Genesis, an early story in the history of the Hebrew people and, indeed, an early story in our own history of knowing God. At Babel, God separated the people so they would not have it too easy and so they would not forget to whom they belonged. As Christians, we need Babel to happen in order for the Pentecost event to have its power. Today’s lesson tells us the story of the re-construction of the church: that regional differences and dialects were not a reason to separate those who had been the followers of Jesus, because with the power of the Holy Spirit even different languages could not keep those who would one day be known as “Christians” apart. However, what often gets lost in this passage, amid the miracle of the different languages coalescing into coherence, is the fact that the speakers are not talking just gibberish, or in 21st Century parlance they aren't "talking smack." No, they are all speaking about the power of God. The Pentecost moment is a moment of faith realized and it is **the** moment when the people of God begin to tell their story. Indeed, it is when our story begins to be told. Pentecost is the moment when the church, as we know it, comes into being. This is the moment when past tragedies and missed opportunities like the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel, and the thrice-crowing cock all fall away. And rather than wallowing in dejection and

loss, the community of God is reconstituted and blessed by the presence of the Spirit. In this moment, the divine presence that is given alters the balance of history for the faithful.

Finally, in the third part of this text, in verses 14b-21, we find Peter returning to the words of the prophet Joel to announce to observers that the events of Pentecost are not due to free flowing alcohol, but instead are ancient prophesies coming true.

*"Men of Judea and 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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, 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, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

In this part of the passage we see the magnitude of the Pentecost, event as Peter uses apocalyptic language to describe the life-altering effects of the Holy Spirit's arrival. As much as I tend to deflect eschatological (end of times) thoughts, I think they seem perfectly appropriate on Pentecost Sunday. I don't think of eschatology as ever being about the end of the world per se, but instead believe it is about the events that lead there. The Pentecost event announces the end of the previous world where Jesus was the guide. Where once there was Jesus, there is something new that has been given to us, and the world is made entirely new in its presence. The movement of the Holy Spirit abounds and the church, for better or worse, is beginning in this passage. At the end of the previous world the life and ministry of Jesus was left to us (under the influence of the Holy Spirit) to share. The old world where we could simply be followers is in the past, and the work of proclaiming the gospel is now ours. Eschatos (the end of times) happened and now the work of the gospel is ours to do!

Now that we have broken the Pentecost event into pieces; I think it is important to place the whole event back together so we recognize that the sum of the pieces is both an assurance for the future and a call to action. The Pentecost event is for us a promise of divine presence: that no matter when or where we live, and no matter what language we speak, we can depend upon the presence of God.

Finally, though, there is the call to action. The rush of the winds and the tongues of fire were not seen in Acts just so we could feel warm and fuzzy about still having God close. Instead with the Pentecost event, we are called upon to respond to the presence of the Holy Spirit. I submit it is completely within our power for the Holy Spirit to become a benign force in the world; it is possible for God's presence to be virtually mitigated by inactivity; it is possible that the life and ministry of Jesus could be forgotten in this world; it is all possible because in Acts the future of the church is left up to us.

This is both a horrifying and a terrific reality, and I would like to tell you how I would like to see it end. Pentecost is, I believe, to be a day for starting fires. The job of the church—let me remind you that is both you and I—as followers of Jesus is to build the fires that will add warmth and light to God's world. It is well and good for us to wear our red shirts and ties this day, but Pentecost means nothing if the faithful fire in our bellies doesn't translate to action in the world in which we live. Pentecost is an evangelism moment—in the best sense of the word. Because with the Holy Spirit we are given a companion that will be with us at every moment, guiding our work and nurturing our growth. If you are building a fire, you need three forms of fuel: some paper, some kindling, and some larger wood. In the Pentecost spirit, here is how I think of this: I would classify the Holy Spirit as the paper and the kindling. I would say there is a little fire burning always. Yet we are called to be the real fuel, the fuel that takes these embers and builds the fire into something that will meet the needs of our world such as:

- Preparing and serving meals for the hungry at Stone Soup
- The teaching of our children
- Nursing and caring for our sick
- Choosing energy sources that protect our world's environment

Log after log must be added. Our passions and our actions must be added so the fire can grow: that we might create a church on fire, a world on fire with God's love. The embers are burning—new fuel is needed. Thanks be to God. Amen.