

Day of Pentecost (B/RCL)
Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
May 19-20, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

What are the visual cues that we celebrate Pentecost this weekend? **Red** paraments and vestments are a tip off! Decorated with what symbols?

- Dove
- Flame
- Bible

The **dove** represents the Holy Spirit. (Remember how the Holy Spirit descended “like a dove” when Jesus was baptized?) Why does **flame** also remind us of that Spirit? (**Tongues of flame** appeared over the disciples’ heads on the 1st Pentecost, right?)

What does fire do that’s bad? (Why is some people’s occupation “fire **fighter**”?) **It destroys; it consumes.** Where’s fire been in the news this past week? Kilauea, the volcano in Volcano National Park on the Big Island of Hawaii has been erupting on a **grand** scale. Even though it’s a shield volcano that doesn’t put on a show quite like Mt. St. Helen’s or Vesuvius, it’s been dramatic, spouting a 30,000 foot high column of fiery ash on Thursday. Lava that usually oozes at a snail’s pace has been galloping and consuming grass, trees, houses, telephone poles, everything in its path. One homeowner in the Leilani Estates neighborhood showed a reporter the devastation and said, “This is what paradise looks like when it turns into a little bit of hell.”¹ Fire is associated with hell because of the pain it causes, the punishment it suggests.

But fire does good things, too, right? Like what?

- Warmth and light for people
- Heat for cooking
- Flame for manufacturing things (firing ceramics, smelting iron, making steel)

In his Canticle of the Sun, St. Francis of Assisi wrote:

Praise be to Thee my Lord for Brother Fire,
through him our night Thou dost enlighten,
and he is fair and merry, boisterous and strong.

We associate the Holy Spirit with bringing things to life, don't we? Hovering over chaos, bringing forth creation, like in the Book of Genesis. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

The Holy Ghost broods over the bent world
With warm breast and ah, bright wing.

That's true. But sometimes for something to be born, something else has to die. Sometimes the stale "order" of our lives has to be upset so we're ready to welcome the FRESH thing God would like to do. There are times when fire does the forest a favor by clearing out the undergrowth that prevents new plants and trees from taking root, and by heating up pinecones so they'll release their seeds. There's the Greek myth about the phoenix, the fanciful bird that explodes into flame and is reduced to cinders before it rises again from its own ashes. (Remember Fawkes the Phoenix, Dumbledore's pet? He did just that.)

The Holy Spirit is like fire because, given a chance, the Spirit incinerates anything in us that's not holy. That's a clue the Holy Spirit is winging around: we have an insight into how we really **could** be/**should** be better people. One example: when I'm upset with someone and can't shake my anger or hurt, in prayer I sometimes imagine ushering that person into the Lord's presence and leaving them there. "Here, **You** take care of this." More than once I've heard the Lord's response as I turn away: "That's interesting. She's [or he's] one of my favorites." And that makes me realize how narrow a slice of anyone's life I see, how little of their soul I know: an insight that injects a good dose of holy humility and clear-sighted God-reality into my self-righteousness!

We also know the Holy Spirit's afoot in those times when:

- an unexpected door is opened;
- inexplicable strength is provided;
- unsolicited but desperately desired help arrives.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit, who's nicknamed "Comforter," helps not by soothing us but by contradicting us. Here's how the Spirit sometimes counteracts our kvetching, our moaning and complaining, our ain't-it-awful tirades with the Word of God.

- You say, "It's impossible." God says: All things are possible. (Luke 18:27)
- You say, "I'm too tired." God says: I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28-30)
- You say, "Nobody really loves me." God says: I love you. (John 3:16 and John 3:34)
- You say, "I can't go on." God says: My grace is sufficient. (2 Corinthians 12:9; psalm 91:15)
- You say, "I can't figure things out." God says: I will direct your steps. (Proverbs 3:5-6)
- You say, "I can't do it." God says, you can do all things. (Philippians 4:13)
- You say, "I'm not able." God says: I am able. (2 Corinthians 9:8)
- You say, "It's not worth it." God says: It will be worth it. (Romans 8:28)
- You say, "I can't forgive myself." God says: I forgive you. (1 John 1:9, Romans 8:1)
- You say, "I can't manage." God says: I will supply all your needs. (Philippians 4:19)
- You say, "I'm afraid." God says: I have not given you a spirit of fear. (2 Timothy 1:7)
- You say, "I'm always worried and frustrated." God says: Cast all your cares on ME. (1 Peter 5:7)
- You say, "I'm not smart enough." God says: I give you wisdom. (1 Corinthians 1:30)
- You say, "I feel all alone." God says: I will never leave you or forsake you. (Hebrews 13:5)

The Hawaiian fire goddess of volcanoes, Pele, is interpreted as angry and even vengeful during an eruption. Our God can also be fiery and explosive, but for the purpose of love.

The last thing we want to do is to domesticate God's Holy Spirit, downgrading the raging fire of the Spirit to a mere spark. Most of us need to up our expectations of how the Spirit is able and willing to transform us –and remember that death of one form or another is a prerequisite of resurrection. We should be careful what we pray for. Anne LaMott has written: before praying, "Come, Holy Spirit," the ushers should issue crash helmets and lash us to the pews. Think about

that! Spiritual seatbelts should be fastened and spiritual tray tables should be placed in an upright position before take-off. Amen

¹Simon Romero, "Another Eruption Shatters Quiet in a Hawaii 'Ghost Town'" (*New York Times*, May 18, 2018), A18.

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