

Day of Pentecost: "Why Not Be Totally Changed Into Fire?"

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

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Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The national weather service is saying we should batten down the hatches for a blockbuster hurricane season. Warmer than usual ocean water, some weather system off of Africa, may raise the number of named storms from the average of 12 to something closer to 18. Forewarned, forearmed. Heaven knows we know the power of wind and waves.

When the day of Pentecost came, [the apostles] were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force – no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them. (Acts 2: 1-4, The Message)

Pentecost means 50; it had been 50 days since the Lord's resurrection. First His disciples had been hiding in fear, then the Lord came and appeared to them and told them to pray for the Holy Spirit. So they'd been praying. And praying. And praying. Do you know the feeling? Praying so hard for so long that you begin to wonder if Anyone's on the receiving end? Or praying and maintaining hope, but lulled into spiritual sleepiness, too sluggish to be fully alert to an answer to prayer coming down the pike?

The risen Lord didn't give His buds a time frame for how long the Spirit would take to show. The Lord certainly doesn't tell us how long it will take for **our** prayers to be answered, either. But we are to be faithful and dogged in prayer, regardless. That word dogged is interesting, isn't it? Anyone with a dog knows how tirelessly a dog will fetch a ball. Most dogs **never** tire of the game before their humans do. (Our Deb would fetch a ball till the cows come home!) **Dogged** is how we should be when we pray. **Tireless**. (Even when we're **tired** of saying the same prayer.) Dogged and endlessly hope-filled.

In the last few weeks' worth of Gospels we've heard often about praying in Jesus' name. We've reminded ourselves that those words, "in Jesus' name," aren't a magic formula to tack onto the end of a prayer. To pray "in Jesus' name" means to pray for the things Jesus prays for, to want things Jesus wants: for His Father's name to be held holy, for the Kingdom to come, for God's will to be done. If we pray a prayer that is self-serving rather than God-honoring and neighbor-loving, that request isn't made "in Jesus' name," regardless of what we say. It's the desire in our hearts not the words on our lips that really count. We need to take time to weigh, discern, pray about, what God's will **is** for us, especially when we have to make decisions and build relationships and mend fences and plot our course in this world.

Over 50 days the disciples doggedly persisted in praying, "Come, Holy Spirit," definitely a prayer "in Jesus' name." Boy, did the Holy Spirit come! St. Luke says there was the sound of a mighty wind, which would have been scary enough even if it were **outside**, but it was **inside**, with them. Were they tempted to be like members of the Banks' family in *Mary Poppins*, running around to stabilize vases and furniture and everything else that wasn't nailed down when the cannon went off down the block each day and shook the house to its foundation? Ears were assaulted and spirits were certainly frightened when, *like a wildfire the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks*.

So many pictures I've seen of the first Pentecost are boring and static: people standing in a nice semi-circle, completely composed, like they're posing for a family photo, with the minor exception of a little lick of flame over each head. The image of the Holy Spirit spreading like wildfire is so much more dynamic and exciting! If you can view the June Lamplighter on-line, look for the coolest picture I've ever seen of the Holy Spirit on page 2. Ellen found this wonderful image of the Holy Spirit as a dove whose feathers are flame! ('Reminds me of Katniss Eberdeen,

for those of you who are *Hunger Games* fans.) It's as if the flames are propelling the dove forward. I envision the disciples clothed in fire, wreathed in flame, rather than just wearing on their heads a tame fire fascinator or pilot light pillbox.

We pray or sing, "Come, Holy Spirit," every Pentecost. We shouldn't do so unthinkingly, though, or cavalierly, or passively. When we ask the Holy Spirit to invade our hearts, our community, nation, world, we should first batten down the spiritual hatches! When we pray, "Come, Holy Spirit," we better keep in mind Annie Dillard's caution in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews (NY: Harper & Row, 1982, p, 40).

You're not here in the sanctuary so you'll have to get someone other than an usher to lash you to the couch or chair. Put on your bike helmet! Grab a life preserver or water wings or at least a noodle from the pool! These are precautionary measures. God has God's own timetable to answer prayer. But the basic message is: when we pray, "Come, Holy Spirit," we should expect something big to happen, if not immediately, eventually, in God's good time. Jesus **promises**: "Very truly I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you." (John 16:23)

To pray "Come, Holy Spirit," **is definitely** to pray in the name of Jesus. There's no question our risen Lord wants us to be **inflamed** with God. If a part of our body is inflamed, that's not a good thing. If someone says something that's inflammatory, that's not a good thing either. But if we are **on fire for God**, that is definitely a good thing!

There's a story from the Desert Fathers about a hermit going to his spiritual advisor and saying:

Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence... now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire?¹

“If you will, you can become all flame.” How would **we** change if we were truly “consumed” by God?

There’s a beautiful Pentecost prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, come.
 Come as the wind and cleanse,
 Come as the fire and burn.
 Convert and consecrate our lives to our great good and your great glory,
 Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

Property friends who came to install our sanctuary screens this Saturday morning reported that on the way they passed a local fire that drew multiple police cars and fire companies from at least 3 towns. That’s not a good kind of conflagration. We’ve all been hearing reports of rioting and fires in Minneapolis, Atlanta, other places, because of the death of George Floyd this past week. That kind of incendiary action is definitely not good either.

When the Holy Spirit comes, God’s Kingdom comes right along with Her and God’s will **is** done, in both our personal and our public lives. God’s will is that we be aflame with love of God and neighbor. God’s will, as we hear it through the prophet Micah, is that we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Once again, our faith is very, very **personal** but never intended to be a **private** thing. That’s why the challenging books of the prophets are part of Scripture, full of reminders that any unjust dealings with our brothers and sisters drown out any words of praise we would offer God. When we pray, “Come, Holy Spirit,” we’re asking God to purify our thoughts, sift the contents of our hearts, in-spire and en-courage us to live holy lives, but we’re also offering ourselves up to the work of healing injustice in our society.

God's Kingdom **will** come and God's will **will** be done in Minneapolis and elsewhere in our nation, not just when violence ends but when justice is done, when the effects of decades of redlining neighborhoods are reversed, when policies are corrected that have prevented people of color from owning homes in certain neighborhoods, accessing quality education, passing worldly wealth from one generation to the next. God uses the people of God, people of faith, people of **all** faiths, to end injustice. God does not wave a magic wand. God clothes us with power from on high, as our Lord promised (Luke 24:49). God **inflames** our hearts to do justice and to love mercy. The Holy Spirit **fires us up** to continue our Lord's work of bringing good news to the poor, announcing liberty to captives, giving sight to the blind, and freeing the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

May **we** boldly pray, "Come, Holy Spirit," bracing ourselves for Heaven's response! More and more may we be changed into fire. Amen

¹Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (NY: New Directions, 1960), p. 50.

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