

Sermon for Pentecost: “The Fire Next Time”

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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. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in their own native language. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “People 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, your young people shall see visions, and your elders 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.

Acts 2:1-21

“I will pour out my Spirit upon you, and you shall prophesy ... Young and old, slave and free, all shall be filled by the power of the Spirit.”

Just this past week, an immense wildfire blazed through the Ocala National Forest, a 430,000-acre protected wilderness at the outskirts of my hometown in Central Florida. Five hundred acres—an area roughly the size of our neighborhood, here in

University Circle—was consumed by the flames. Fifty households had to be evacuated from the fire area, less than five miles from the neighborhood where I grew up.

As a kid, this time of year always meant fire season in the forest that surrounded our small town. As predictable as summer rains, flames would blaze through, leaving a charred and unrecognizable landscape in their wake. Often, on summer trips out to the beach, we would drive through the forest and see the blackened bottoms of trees, the scorched earth, the bareness of the land that had once been thick with wild undergrowth and wild creatures.

What's interesting is what we learned in school as kids about these wildfires:

Far from being a devastating disaster to the forest ecosystem, fire is actually necessary to renew and transform the forest. Pine cones only release their seeds when they come into contact with intense heat. Destructive and invasive species are killed off. Sure enough, as you move through the forest, you'd begin to notice those areas that had been burned last year, or the year before: the old blackened sticks of pine trees were still pointing to the sky, but here and there you'd see that the undergrowth was lively and green.

Animals had returned.

The forest was being born anew.

We are in our own kind of fire season. And it's fitting that we come at this particular moment to the season of Pentecost, a season where the winds whip and the flames of the Spirit burn within, because we are a community primed for transformation. There are deep, burning questions, just under the surface in our conversations all around this church:

How do we continue to follow Christ in this place, when we feel like the church that we've known, the church that we've loved, is disappearing so fast that it feels like it's going up in smoke? How do we continue to exist in the midst of this unrecognizable landscape? Could it be that God is calling us to participate in the end of the very church as we know it? It seems unthinkable and yet ... this is Pentecost—fire season—when the Spirit of God rages through the people, and transforms everything we thought we knew.

It's clear from this morning's text that the early apostles found their Pentecost moment as unsettling and bewildering as our present moment might feel to us.

Yet Peter does not follow the crowd in dismissing his fellow apostles as outliers—labeling them as drunken or crazy because what they are saying may not make sense to some. Instead, Peter makes the bold move in this moment to affirm the power of the Holy Spirit at work, and to claim a place for himself and his partners in the long line of messengers sent by God to bear witness to the truth of God's reign—an old message given new voice, for a changing community.

The good news that we recognize in the midst of the unsettling reality of Pentecost is that this has all happened before. The Church has been here before.

This church community has been here before, and in those former dark times, the community of faith was able to respond with creativity and imagination. By the power of the Spirit we discovered a new normal in the midst of an uncertain present moment.

The Spirit's work in Pentecost is to reveal God's deep love for us, a love so intense it is able to burn away all that is not our most holy selves. *Our* call is to let those Pentecost fires burn: living with the reality of an unsettling present moment and faithfully allowing God's deep and intense love to transform us and lead us in a new direction.

In his 1963 essay *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin writes about precisely this type of love as he examines the consequences of racial injustice on the soul of America. He imagines what our cultural landscape might look like if we were bold enough, and brave enough, to seek the thing we most desperately need and want—deep, intense, and honest love. He writes, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” Baldwin goes on, “I use the word ‘love’ here ... as a state of being ... a state of grace. [Love] in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”

That kind of life-changing love can be terrifying. Like facing a blazing wall of wildfire, it is not for the faint of heart. It can strip us to our very foundations and leave us unrecognizable. Perhaps that's exactly where we need to be.

From ancient times, the phoenix has been a symbol of rebirth. Every 500 years, so the story goes, the phoenix would go up in flames, and rise again from the ashes of her former self. For Friedrich Nietzsche, the story of the Phoenix was a call for humankind toward transformation—but Nietzsche believed you had to be willing to go all the way.

“You must be ready to burn yourself in your own flame,” he once wrote, “how could you rise anew if you have not first become ashes?” How can we know the true power of the Spirit if we do not allow ourselves to be fully consumed by its fire? You see, radical change does not mean that we are left with nothing. What it does mean is that what we find when it's all over may be something that we never, ever, expected.

Yes, it will hurt.

Yes, it will be strange.

Yes, everything will be different, and yes, in the end, it will be ok.

Are we ready to live into our call as Pentecost people?

If we are, we can dwell in the fire. We can exist in the midst of it and not be afraid because we know out of ashes, God makes all things new. We may not see literal flames of fire in this room today, but make no mistake, there are fires burning in this place. The Spirit is present and already doing the work of creative destruction, of renewal and rebirth—in our church, in our culture, the Spirit is urging us toward a radical transformation.

It is calling us toward a reckoning with who we are at our deepest core.

The Spirit is calling us to unmask ourselves, to be true to our own story—our gifts and our brokenness, our joy and our pain. May the fires of God’s Spirit continue to burn within us, this day and in the days to come. May we, like the forest and the Phoenix, be born again out of these flames.

Amen.