

The Astonishing Day We Caught Fire
Sermon for the Day of Pentecost, June 4, 2017

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Today is one of the great feast days of the church, Pentecost. A word which all you Latin scholars know means 50. As in the 50th day after Easter.

That has to be the worst name ever for what we are about today. As if we all come together to say, "Yay! It's the 50th day after Easter! We changed the color from white to red!"

There is tradition behind the name. In Judaism, the religion of Jesus, the 50th day after Passover commemorates the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, a vitally important aspect of the continuing life of the Jewish people. This festival was called different things in different languages - Shavuot in Hebrew, the Festival of Weeks in English, and Pentecost in Greek. It was on that day of Pentecost that today's reading from Acts took place, and ever after, for Christians, the day has been known as the day the Holy Spirit was bestowed upon the followers of Jesus.

Honestly, though, that exposition is way too flat and dry for what we are about today, which is both mysterious and astonishing, described not so much by words as by fire and wind. The Holy Spirit is the "giver of life" as we say in the Creed and it is, in essence, Holy Power. It is the infinite, creative, power of self-giving love.

This is the same power that in the beginning moved over the chaos and the deep and created and formed the Earth, that breathed life into the nostrils of mortals formed of clay, that held back the waters of the Red Sea to set the subjugated free, and bulldozed a highway through the wilderness to lead the captives home from exile. The power that caused a baby to be born in Bethlehem who grew into a man who healed the sick and fed the hungry and found the lost and broke the social taboos of the day. This is the power that on the third day raised that man from the dead.

This holy power dynamically breaks through all barriers - physical and social - for the singular purpose of giving life.

This giving of life is not only vital but absolutely urgent. The signs of it can be bewildering and unsettling, found bringing healing and goodness wherever there is suffering and brokenness, from war zones to our own homes. The power and love from the Spirit is not just given but it is poured out abundantly, overflowing like wine at the wedding at Cana, multiplying like loaves and fishes on the mountain.

So this is irrepressible power we're talking about here, not tame stuff. "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?" cries writer Annie Dillard. "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. For... God may draw us out to where we can never return."

When Jesus breathes on people, it's not just to comfort them, but to give them power to come out from behind locked doors and lives of fear and despair, blowing them out into the world to insist on giving food to the hungry and health to the sick and rest to the weary and companionship to the prisoner and sanctuary to the stranger. In my mind's eye I see them staggering out of a house slightly skewed off its foundation with the door off the hinge, adjusting their blasted clothing and smoothing stumps of singed hair, hearts aflame, thrilled with the scary, eager to tell everyone how absolutely wonderful this new life is and determined to give it to others.

Folks like us Episcopalians are a little wary this kind of talk. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "We don't keep the Spirit of life in the back room because she is shy but because she is dangerous." So let's just call it the Day of Pentecost, not "the astonishing day we caught fire."

Nobody knows more about what it is like for life to be utterly upended and transformed and thrilled with the scary than the folks sitting in these front rows here. The coming of a child into your life rocks your world. These little people who are still fresh from heaven, trailing clouds of glory, have the power to unleash the fire of fierce, primal love like nothing else. They will change your life and your world in ways you cannot even imagine now.

How appropriate it is, then, to baptize them on this feast day celebrating the dangerous and irrepressible and holy power of love that binds us all together as the people of God. Let us all together with them breathe in the breath of Jesus (that is, Latin again, to be inspired) to galvanize as a people to live out our call to love our neighbors and cherish creation, the work of God's own hands.

So come Holy Spirit, to seal us as a people. Fire us with longing for justice and mercy, for building community, establishing harmony, and restoring trust. Move us to stand up bravely for those who are abused and broken. And charge us to break through whatever barriers we need to break through with our own holy fire and astonish the world with your love.

Amen.