“Fire and Spirit”

Pentecost Sunday, May 20, 2018, Year B

Acts 2:1-21

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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*2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. – Acts 2:1-4*

What does God sound like? In the Book of Acts passage, God sounds like “a violent wind,” and like 15 different languages all being spoken at once. What does God look like? Visions, dreams, a blood-red heaven and Earth burning in fire and a smoky mist, a sun darkly shining, and a blood-red moon.

Pentecost is a day for listening for and looking for signs of God’s presence. It’s not a day to sit back and relax. It’s a day for picking up on the energy of the universe, the Holy Energy all around us, animated by God. God’s energy is a living energy that, if we dare, we can tap into and be carried away by. God’s presence is all around us, if we only took the time to see it and feel it and embrace it.

Pentecost is not a day for relaxing. The Jews in Jerusalem that day were violently woken up out of their post-Jesus stupor. After being on Earth for 40 days after his resurrection, Jesus was taken up into heaven to be with God. The disciples watched Jesus ascend until he disappeared into the clouds. We wonder if they were so awestruck that they forgot he said he’d send the Holy Spirit in his place.

But it’s likely they didn’t expect the God’s Holy Spirit to be so loud and so frightening. But, throughout biblical history, God is rarely quiet and mellow. More often, when God shows up, things shake, rattle, and roll.

When we had our church fire last December, God shook us up, and not in a good way. We were frightened; we thought we’d lost everything. We went down memory lane, remembering all the significant events of the past: weddings, baptisms, funerals, and concerts. Until we knew the extent of the damage, we thought the worst. We wondered how we would ever pick up the smoldering pieces of our history and fashion them into a living, breathing, praying church again.

This is the feeling of Pentecost: fear, uncertainty, and mostly awe. Awe at the way God’s world erupts when the Holy Spirit enters into our space and into us. After the fire, we were filled with gratitude at the outpouring of care and concern for us, especially from strangers we’d never met. Churches offered their sanctuaries to us. One of our neighbors offered to throw a fundraiser for us. There was a powerful Spirit about here in Saugus, a spirit of generosity, neighborliness, and togetherness.

That is exactly what God’s Holy Spirit did on that first Pentecost. The Spirit made a rushing noise like a violent wind and sent up flames to attract the attention of all the Jews from all over the Middle East, who were visiting Jerusalem for the Jewish festival celebrating God giving Moses the Ten Commandments. The Spirit brought them all together and then the Spirit spoke to them through the mouths of the disciples. Then each one of the Jews from each different country heard the disciples speaking in their own native language.

Wouldn’t it be nice if we all spoke the same language? I’m not talking about English, but rather a common belief in going about Jesus’ ministry of healing people. It would be nice of the entire Body of Christ, internationally and right here in our lovely sanctuary, would be of one mind about the message we want to share with our neighbors about the radical love and fiery passion Jesus had for the world.

Everyone sees and hears God in their own way. That is a good and beautiful thing. If we were all the same, what a dull world it would be. Some people need to be in a quiet, serene place in order to commune with God. Some find God in the great outdoors, on a mountain, or floating in a boat on a lake. Some need gospel music and a hand-clapping, jumping-for-joy congregation. Diversity is very, very good - God’s own creation, of course.

But to share our stories of God-incidences, when we felt the touch of God’s presence? That is our challenge. Some of us are too private, too introverted to ever share with anyone else how we have seen or felt God’s presence, especially if they are someone we don’t know. Yet, we feel strongly inside that God has touched us many times. Some of us have no problem sharing. Sometimes this emboldens others to share their stories with us. Sometimes they just back slowly away from this crazy Christian talk.

How do we bring the fire of Pentecost into story-telling about us and our church? We can do it through music, through the fire of word and tune that elevates us to another level. We can do it with poetry and passionate prayer. We can do it with meaningful, touching rituals that can bind us closer together. We can do it by the “e” word – evangelism – meaning talking about how church is the place we go to find rest and renewal, but also energy and passion, for continuing the healing and hard work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Just as God giving Moses the Ten Commandments set in motion the formation of a new community living by new and godly rules, so Pentecost set in motion the formation of a world-wide community living by the gospel rules of love and passion. It was a perfect storm: Jews from all over the Middle East, gathered for an important religious festival, saw, heard, and felt the power of the Holy Spirit move among them that day. Even though their languages were different, they heard and understood every word the disciples said. And then they could not help but tell someone else about it, especially the folks back home. This is how the gospel message spread throughout the Middle Eastern world. It’s like when we come home from a great vacation and we want to tell all our friends about it. Telling stories, spreading the good news, is how Christianity became a global religion.

The legacy of Pentecost has been carried on down through the centuries by people who aren’t afraid to tell their story. Have we been telling our story enough - and well enough - to make others curious about what we’ve experienced here?

Think back to every baptism we’ve had here. Who has not been moved by the sight of the baby in my arms as I walk them down the aisle to introduce them to their new church family? Did we pass those stories along to another person? Think about Holy Communion. Who has not felt included at the table when I give the invitation? Did we tell our neighbor how good it feels to be accepted as we are by God and this congregation? Who has not marveled, even laughed with delight, at our wise and witty grade-schoolers remarks during the children’s message? Did we pass along the story about the 4-year-old who, when he was told the story about Jesus turning water into wine, said, “My mommy drinks wine!”

These kinds of stories are easy to tell. These are the kinds of stories that add up to a description of a church where holy things are happening. Because of who we are – God’s Pentecost people – it is our call, our mission, to tell these stories. The only way to keep any organization going is to spread the word about it – what we have learned from it, or how we’ve have been changed by it, and why belonging to it matters.

When the disciple Peter stands up in the city square to refute the charge that they were all drunk, he makes a powerful speech, reciting the prophet Joel’s vision of the day when God will come to Earth. He quotes:

***17****“‘In the last days, God says,  
    I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
    your young men will see visions,  
    your old men will dream dreams.****18****Even on my servants, both men and women,  
    I will pour out my Spirit in those days,  
    and they will prophesy.****19****I will show wonders in the heavens above  
    and signs on the earth below,  
    blood and fire and billows of smoke.****20****The sun will be turned to darkness  
    and the moon to blood  
    before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.****21****And everyone who calls  
    on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

Can we see the vision? Can we dream the dream? Can we see God’s fire-y spirit, the shocking black sun and the red, red moon? Can we feel the rush of the Holy Spirit blowing through ourselves and our church?

It’s Pentecost. It’s not a day of resting or relaxing. Pentecost is a day to pick up on the energy that is God, all around us, all around this church, all around the world. Let go any restraint and let it in. Know that it is Holy Energy – the vitality, the verve, the get-up-and-go *push* we need to enliven our private spiritual lives and our community spiritual life. It’s Pentecost. Can you feel it? Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

Bartlett, David L., and Taylor, Barbara Brown, Eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2-7.

*Zondervan NIV Study Bible,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).