

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
First Presbyterian Church
May 21, 2023
Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2:1-21

“This Church Is On Fire”

Spirit...Wind...Breath...fill our lungs and lives with your energizing presence; refresh our stale minds; and stir our slowly-beating hearts; so that we may humbly and courageously be your breathing, gusting, good presence in the world. Amen.

I once heard a minister say the worst thing that ever happened to the church, and by church he meant the church in general . . .

The worst thing that ever happened to the church was the invention of the fire engine.

I thought that was a really odd thing for someone to say. After all, fire engines are good. They, and by they, I mean the firefighters who ride them and drive them, fight fires. Think about the speed a fire would travel without the fire engine to come and stop it? A flickering ember can quickly turn into a full blown flame before you know it.

Last Fall I met a woman whose house burned to the ground. She lost everything in it. Everything. She'd lived there 20 years; built her life there. And in one night, she lost it all. I asked her about the experience and how she managed to live through it with what appeared to be such resilience and grace . . . since the thought of my house burning down scares me to death. She said it forced her to re-evaluate what was important, and what was not.

Which was exactly the point the minister was making in his assessment of the fire engine. “Before the fire engine,” he said, “churches burned down all the time. And when they did, they were forced to re-evaluate what was important, and what was not. It forced them to rethink their reason for being.”

His thought has stuck with me all these years.

Think about how different things would be here if there had never been a fire in church #3. What would our outreach to the community look like if we were located on East Berry Street? Would there still be a Korean Language Ministry? My guess is there would be no theater, no gallery, no Aeolian Skinner organ of national reputation. Thus no arts program. It would be a very different church.

Fire. It's dangerous. It destroys things. But maybe, just maybe, it can bring new life.

When the Spirit blew through Jerusalem on that first Pentecost, the Spirit blew through like a rushing wind with flames! Flames that can and did turn into fire, and it forced everyone gathered there to re-evaluate what was important and what was not . . . and they would continue to do that throughout the book of Acts . . . and most of the time when they did that, it created problems because it created a whole new paradigm for the Church.

You see, up until the Holy Spirit's arrival the disciples were pretty much just hanging out. They left Galilee after Jesus ascended to heaven, went to Jerusalem like the angel instructed them to do, and elected Mathias to replace Judas. But that was about it. For all we know they were sitting around reminiscing about the good old days and kind of feeling sorry for themselves that their best days with Jesus were behind them.

But then the Holy Spirit came, just like Jesus promised, and changed things because the Holy Spirit's presence is as disruptive as it is comforting. The Spirit, as that lovely hymn sings, stirs us from placidness like a wind on the sea . . . and winds on the sea aren't always gentle. Sometimes winds on the sea have a hurricane like force, and when they hit the shore they change things forever.

For the early Christian communities, Pentecost marked the moment when people's gaze shifted from looking back at their memories of Jesus to looking ahead to what they must trust to sustain their life after his death and resurrection had passed into history and memory. With the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, their attention needed to shift from history to future, to what had happened to what was next.

And that certainly wasn't easy for them to do. Fear colored the scene; they were locked away in the upper room, scared half to death that the authorities would do to them what they did to Jesus. They were doing absolutely everything in their power to secure their safety, huddled together behind locked doors, barricaded inside.

But what happened next?

In John, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into them and then sent them out into the world. In Acts, the Holy Spirit arrived on the scene like a violent wind and kicked them to curb.

There would be no fondly looking back for them. The Spirit wouldn't have it. Because there was work to be done, a community that needed them, that needed to hear Christ's message of forgiveness and inclusion, a message about love conquering hate and hope trumping despair.

They may have wanted to hunker down and retreat into their memories, but the Holy Spirit wouldn't allow it.

Emotionally decamping to the past isn't an unusual reaction to have when things get tough. It's alluring to hunker down with a sweet memory and just settle in. When the future swarms with unknowns, or when we don't like what we think the future may hold, it can feel good to just hide away in history.

Some of you know that last week I went to Akron, Ohio, my hometown, for a family funeral. In the morning the funeral was held at the church where Terry and I were married and I grew up in and was ordained at, and late in the afternoon we had time to drive by the house I grew up in, and my old high school, which was actually torn down a couple of years ago and a brand new Firestone High School stands in its place. It was fun taking a trip down memory lane.

But Akron, even though it will always be my childhood home and I'll think of it fondly, is my past. And while I can hide away in those memories and hang on to them, I choose instead to let them give me strength for the future. I choose to find in those fond memories nourishment for fonder hopes and an even better future.

You see, memory can be an escape, or memory can light the way when the present is unclear and the future is unknown. Memories of courageous days can give us courage when we so desperately need it. Memories of sweet days can help us through times of pain and loss. Memories of bright days can give us hope on dark ones. Memories of good times can give us strength in times of doubt and despair.

I have no doubt that when the disciples had days of doubt and despair, they remembered the days they spent with Jesus, and remembered what he promised them the last time they saw him: “As the Father has sent me, so I now send you”, and then he gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit to create in them the courage they needed to follow his command. He promised them that no matter what they may face, the Holy Spirit is with always them.

And that promise extends to us, too. That no matter what challenges or difficulties we may face, the Holy Spirit walks beside us and gives us not only the strength to endure, but equips us to flourish when life gives us life’s challenges.

It is the promise of Pentecost.

But this doesn’t mean we’ll always understand the Holy Spirit. As Barbara Brown Taylor once said, “the Holy Spirit is something we trust, not something we understand.” We won’t always understand why the Spirit moves in certain ways or directions, or why some things happen to us or don’t happen to us. But we can trust the Spirit to be with us and for us. We can celebrate the many ways the Spirit works in our lives, our church, our community, and the ways in which she knows just what we need, and who we need, and when. We can trust the Holy Spirit to equip us, encourage us and stay with us.

On that first Pentecost, things changed forever. Returning to the days of yesteryear was no longer an option. God had bigger things in mind; God had big dreams for the disciples, bigger than they ever imagined.

As we know, big things happened on the first Pentecost.

Three thousand people were baptized that day, and that 3000 grew to 5000. Later on a large group of priests joined the movement, as did a guy by the name of Paul who, at the end of Acts, was imprisoned in Rome, where tradition says he was martyred. But not before he had schlepped 10,000 miles across Asia Minor

spreading the good news about Jesus and planting churches. Today, nearly 1/3 of the world identifies itself as Christian.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if the disciples had decided to stay in Jerusalem. What would the church look like?

My guess is that it would be a very different church, probably a much smaller one, if not a non-existent one.

It's possible that no one would have ever heard the good news about Christ, that none of us would be here if Peter and the disciples had not dreamed big dreams.

The Spirit in our story from Acts comes with hurricane-like force and flames of fire and disrupts the disciples' lives, throwing them off course and forcing them to re-think how things are going to be. There would no longer be "this is how we've always done things" or "this is how we've gotten used to things being done" . . . not now . . . because the Spirit forced them to take a different path.

So often in life we want to stay put, because that's familiar and comfortable. But if the story of Pentecost teaches us anything, it's that staying put is not an option. God has bigger things in mind for us; God knows great things wait for us on the horizon.

Friends, God is not the prisoner of the past, waiting for us to get back to a time that is better in memory than it was in reality. God calls us to hope for more than we remember. And so it is that on Pentecost the Holy Spirit also arrives to guide us, to nudge us forward, and to give us the courage to dream dreams and to think big. So let us move into a future that God can already see from here, even if we cannot, because it's more than we remember; it's better than we remember.

Amen.