

May 28, 2023
“Ignited: Catching Fire”
Acts 2:1-21

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It's Memorial Day weekend and the unofficial start to the summer. We celebrated our graduates today. Most schools are out for the summer now, and many of us are getting ready for cookouts with the family, evenings in the backyard, camping trips and all kinds of summer fun.

When I think of Summer, I can't help but think of campfires. Some of you know that I was a camp counselor. Before that, I was a camper there every summer dating back to when I was in 2nd grade. And, my favorite part of camp had to be the campfires. I was a city kid, and we didn't really have fires—people didn't have firepits and things like they sometimes do now. So, sitting around the campfire, singing, laughing, and telling stories is such a powerful memory for me. I was mesmerized by the dance of the flames. And I can still remember the smell of the fire, the pops and crackles of the wood burning, the taste of the S'mores, the sting of the smoke in my eyes when it inevitably followed me.

There was a feeling of community, of peace, that seemed to beckon to anyone who could see or hear what was happening. The campfire was a place to come away from everything else that was happening, a place to pull up a seat, a place that offered light and life in the darkness, a place of joy! The campfire was a place where we could recharge and maybe even be recreated. As I think back, sometimes I wonder if this wasn't one of my first glimpses of the church as God calls us to be....

As a camp counselor, one of the first things that they taught us was how to build a fire- and there's an art and science to it. You have to have fuel, oxygen, and heat. You usually can't just pile a bunch of wood together and expect the flames to burn. You needed to have the sticks close enough together to catch, but

with space for the air to breathe into the flames. Building a fire and keeping it going can be hard, depending on the conditions, but as they say on the TV show, *Survivor*, fire is life. It was how we cooked our meals, so it nourished us. It was our light at night, it was our heat when it got chilly...

The same thing can be said of the Holy Spirit's fire in our souls. It must be accepted carefully, allowing space for the spirit to move in our life, to ignite our souls. It nourishes us, recharges us. It's our light in the darkness. It draws us together, warms us in a chilly world, and kindles our passions so that we are ready to be sent out to share that fire, that unfailing love of God with others who need to know, feel, and experience God's grace. Our job is to receive the gift that the Holy Spirit wants to give us and to share that with others.

Fire has long been an image that has been used to talk about the presence of God. Looking back through Scripture, there's the burning bush that called Moses to go to Pharaoh, there's the fire that guided the Israelites into the promised land, there's the chariot of fire that carried Elijah to heaven, and in today's Scripture, we have the coming of the Holy Spirit described as tongues of fire.

In today's reading, we have this incredible story of the power of the Holy Spirit that couldn't be contained and that poured out to change the lives of more than 3,000 people that day, at a time when social media and TVs didn't exist. And it all started with a band of followers whose flames seemed like they had just about gone out.

Jesus' followers had just witnessed His ascension into heaven. He was gone, again. Yet, Jesus had promised that He would not leave them alone, that the Holy Spirit, the comforter, would come upon them. But they probably felt alone and might have been afraid. We're not sure of the number, but really, the number doesn't matter. We just know that they were in the room, gathered together to celebrate the Festival of Weeks, which was a celebration centered around the giving of the law to Moses.

And what happens when you have embers of a fire and you gather them together? Their heat warms each other, and then when you blow on those embers, all of a sudden a flame can erupt.

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" (vv. 2-4)

"God was determined to fill them with power. The Holy Spirit came with the rush of a violent wind, like the creative wind from God that "swept over the face of the waters" on the first day of creation (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit danced with divided tongues, as of fire, like the burning bush that revealed God to Moses — a bush that "was blazing, yet it was not consumed" (Exodus 3:2). The Galilean disciples began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability, making it possible for them to communicate with devout Jews from every nation." (<https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/93041305>).

The coming of the Spirit brought noise and chaos, and it brought community. The followers were joined together. I wonder what would have happened if they had not been together in one place. Would the coming of the Spirit have made such a difference?

We hear so many times these days that people are religious but that they don't need to go to church to follow God. They are right, they don't. But when our embers of faith are burning low, it helps to be near others who can help to stoke the fires of faith within us. Who can help us to receive the breath of the Spirit so that our hearts might begin to glow again with the power of God's love and grace. Part of coming together as the church is me putting my embers next to you and your embers, and what happens then?

Maybe a little flame, and then add in the breath of the Holy Spirit, and the fires of faith can leap to life where only moments ago they seemed to be waning.

Just look at what was possible in today's story. There were devout Jews from all over the world who witnessed what was happening, and each heard them talking in their own language. This is one of the wonders of Pentecost. The Spirit was at work in breaking down barriers so that God's love could be shared with everyone. God was creating a community that was inclusive, rather than exclusive.

Who, today, needs to hear God's love spoken to them, spoken over them in their own language? The young, the old. Rich and poor. Conservatives and liberals. Men and women. We could go on and on. With as many different ways as we have to communicate, we certainly have trouble doing it. Sometimes, even though we are speaking English, we are literally speaking different languages. Have you looked at a teen's text chain lately? Check out this phrase on the screen, I'm going to give you about 30 seconds to try to figure out what it says:

Dad@hvn, ur spshl. we want wot u want & urth2b like hvn. giv us food & 4giv r sins lyk we 4giv uvaz. don test us! sAv us! bcos we kno ur boss, ur tuf & ur cool 4 eva! k?'

Got it?

For the uninitiated among us, this probably looks like a new form of transliterated Near Eastern hieroglyphics. For the younger demographic, however, this one's a no-brainer.

It's the Lord's Prayer — or at least a shorthand and post-modernized version of it. This particular version by York College (U.K.) student Matthew Campbell won a contest put on by the online Christian magazine Ship of Fools in which entrants were encouraged to update the oft-repeated prayer to read in 160 characters or less- about what used to be a standard Tweet.

Here's the "literal" translation of the prayer Jesus taught us, er, texted us: "Dad in heaven, you are special. We want what you want and earth to be like heaven. Give us food and forgive our sins like we forgive others. Don't test us! Save us! Because we know you are boss, you are tough and you are cool forever. Okay?" (<https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/93000057>)

Different language? Maybe, but one that might speak louder and clearer to the next generation than the 17th Century version that is often prayed in our churches. Don't get me wrong, I love the traditional words of the Lord's prayer and how it connects us with generations past, but part of the power of Pentecost was that the believers who gathered together were sent out. They left where they were and went to the people who needed to hear the message of Jesus's power and might, His love and grace. They went where the people were and spoke in a language that they could understand. And, God gave them that power.

Just look what he did through Peter—days before, he was denying that he even knew Jesus, and now he was standing and testifying in front of thousands....

That same power is available to us today. The Holy Spirit wants us to break down barriers and to work in and through us to share God's grace with others. This may involve learning a new language, or teaching English as a Second Language. It may require serving in First Community Kitchen reaching those with limited resources. It might mean creating new worshipping communities that share more modern music, or it may challenge us to take a church service out into the parking lot, or in a park or coffee shop, or somewhere else in order to reach people who do not feel comfortable entering a church building.

So often, we are content to hold worship services for ourselves and pitch our Bible studies and discussion groups to people who are already in the church. But the book of Acts challenges us to connect with people who are different from ourselves.

Just like he was doing thousands of years ago, God is still doing a new thing. He is alive and present in our lives and in our midst. And, the Holy Spirit is here to empower us to live into a Christian community who cares for and welcomes those who differ from us, those who speak a different language, those who need to experience and grow in the love of God. Here's the amazing, reassuring part- we aren't alone on this journey. The Holy Spirit wants to come as a mighty wind to kindle the flames of love and grace in us. To send us out into the world as changed people. To spread the light and joy of God's love and grace.

There's an old story about a group of miners during the California gold rush. One day as they were working, they struck gold, but they needed to go to town to get supplies in order to keep mining. So, they swore one another to secrecy. They wouldn't tell anyone what they had found. They would just go and get what they needed and return to unearth their treasure.

They rode into town, went their separate ways to get their supplies, and then met up at their appointed meeting place. By that point, a crowd had gathered.

The miners looked at each other, wondering who had blabbed about their discovery, each blaming the other. Problem was, none of them had to say a thing, the joy of their discovery was written all over their faces. And it was so obvious to anyone that met them that they each developed followers who wanted to see what had brought them so much joy.

John Wesley said, "Get on fire for God, and people will come to watch you burn." When the Spirit comes alive in us, others notice.

On this day of Pentecost, we pray that the fire of the Holy Spirit will glow brightly in this place. That this will be a place to power up for the journey, to be refreshed, to be nourished, a place where we might place our embers side by side and where the Spirit might ignite within us the passion to share God's joy and peace. May we go forth from this place, with the joy written all over our faces, ready to share the Good News of God's love and grace and power with those who need to hear it in their own language, in their own places. May our experience of God's holy spirit bring us so much joy that wherever we go, whatever we do, we might carry the light of Christ with us.

As St. Catherine of Siena is credited with saying, "Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire." Let us carry the light.