

“The Spirit and the Fire”
Acts 2:1-18; Numbers 11:24-30
Pentecost Sunday

Numbers 11:24-30

²⁴So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent.

²⁵Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

²⁶Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”

²⁸And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” ²⁹But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”

³⁰And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Acts 2:1-18

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked,

“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.

¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷‘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, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.’”

The Sermon

What do you know about the God who made you, who loves you, and who gave everything for you?

What do you want to tell the neighbors about how amazing it is to walk in that light, and how it allows you to see the world and all its people through eyes of love and care and mercy?

What do you want to say, in words and in the way you live, and the things you do, and the decisions you make?

It has been hard to look at the burning neighborhoods, including civic structures of stability and places where people have invested their whole lives into making a livelihood for themselves while serving their community, and then to look at the images of fire in Acts chapter 2—the red and yellow and orange of Pentecost—in the same way.

It's even harder to hear "I can't breathe," and not for the first time, from a black man under the heel of white men armed with weapons and authority, as onlookers cry mercy on the man's behalf, as those men's demeanors appear unmoved by the life being crushed away in a moment that is agonizingly familiar.

It's hard to see and hear the footage of yet another human being saying, "I can't breathe," and then return to contemplating the *ruah*, the Spirit, the wind, the *breath* of God who moves over the waters and breathes life into dry bones and empowers the Church to speak.

I have had the privilege of knowing police officers in a number of different places, and they have been people I loved and respected. I would trust my life, and if I had been called upon to do so, I would have been willing, without hesitation, to entrust the lives and safety of my African American friends as I would my own family, to every single one

of those officers I have had the privilege of knowing or being acquainted with.

Even the guy who pulled me over when I was in college. I believe the allegation concerned an issue of the alleged rate at which my automobile had been allegedly proceeding on the alleged highway.

He was not pleasant. But he let me go because he saw the Indiana University sticker on my car and said, “It’s going to hurt enough when Purdue beats you all today.” I believe his language may have been a bit more colorful than that.

Our basketball team destroyed Purdue that afternoon, incidentally.

But I can laugh about this unpleasant encounter now, and tell it, almost wistfully, as a funny little long-ago anecdote on the breathtaking back roads of Indiana that have assumed an almost mystical status in my imagination.

When I was a teenager, I used to indulge what I didn’t realize at the time was a deep introversion, and I would go for long walks at night, well after dark, all over my hometown. I loved those walks. They were spiritual and enriching. And I had no clue—it literally never occurred to me—what a privilege it was that I could do that without ever being questioned or harassed.

My parents didn’t have to have the fraught worry, did not ever have to have *the talk* with me. And I say that reflecting on my total naivety both as a male and as a white guy. Just blissfully clueless.

As a teenager on Saturdays, or during the summer, I would ride my bike through the economically disadvantaged parts of town on the other side of the tracks, and I’d ride through the country club neighborhood not far from where I lived. I was a stranger in both worlds. But I never realized what a privilege that was.

A few years ago, the Montreat Conference Center had a great event featuring some prominent African American speakers and had, quite appropriately, made arrangements to have security on hand, given the appalling number of “incidents” that have taken place (what an inadequate word that is for “atrocities”).

Shortly before the event, I saw some officers outside the auditorium, and I knew that a number had volunteered their time and expertise to be there; and, as every officer does every day, by putting on the uniform and going to work, they had opened themselves up to personal risk.

I went over just to say a word of thanks to them for being there, and the officer closest to me said, “It’s an honor for us to be here today; we asked to be here,” and the other two came over and joined in saying the same thing. All of these officers were pretty much exactly the same shade of white that I am.

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.”

What do you know about the God who made you, who loves you, and who gave everything for you?

What do you want to tell the neighbors about how amazing it is to walk in that light, and how it allows you to see the world and all its people through eyes of love and care and mercy?

What do you want to say, in words and in the way you live, and the things you do, and the decisions you make?

As my junior high science teacher explained patiently to the unrelentingly baffled look on my face, fire is not a gas, or a liquid, or a solid. Fire is energy.

There is a terrifying energy that draws us like moths—it pulls us in and repels us in sometimes equal measure.

Sometimes the equilibrium gets stretched out of shape, and we get pulled in a little closer to a divine fire, but we sense that if we get too close, we don't know what might happen.

Sometimes, we are moths.

Sometimes, we're Icarus, who according to Greek mythology fashioned wings out of feathers and wax and flew close enough to the sun that the wax melted and he fell into the sea.

We want to fly so high, but relying only on our own ingenuity and industriousness.

Meanwhile, God has offered us the highest heights, but half the time, we don't even know how to accept the invitation.

In Acts 2, the fire comes to the disciples, unbidden. It doesn't land on them to burn them; it's so gentle it is only "tongues, as of fire."

But make no mistake, in it is all the energy of the universe.

What do you know about the God who made, loves and gave everything for you?

What do you want to tell the neighbors about God?

And how do you want to do that?

The Spirit gave the disciples voices they didn't have before, specifically so that they could and would spread the good news,

and so that, as they proclaim and embody God's love to numbers of people who would go out or go home and share God's love to numbers of other people,

that divine love, which is grace and peace, mercy and justice, loyalty and mutual accountability, forgiveness and abundant generosity, would surround and envelop the whole world of humankind.

We are not going to be able to worship the way we are used to worshipping for some time yet.

Happily, we are a Pentecost church. God gives us new languages to speak with in order to proclaim the good news to our neighbors, to the world, maybe even back to ourselves.

What do you want to tell the world about the God who made, loves and gave everything for you, and me, and them?

And how do you want to do that?

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