

Sunday, June 9, 2019
Day of Pentecost (Year C)
Acts 2.1-21; Romans 8.14-17
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“And 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. [and] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2.2-4).

Here in California, particularly in Southern California, we are all too familiar with the power of the two “elements” reported in the account of the first Pentecost in our reading from Acts: fire and wind. Every year we face the threat of wildfires, particularly in the more wilderness areas of our state, with each year seeming to be worse than the previous year. Last year was no exception, with 2018 seeing the worst destruction from wildfires in history, with 1.89 million acres destroyed, along with thousands of structures, and sadly, the loss of numerous lives. And every year we face the threat of incredibly strong Santa Ana winds, downing trees and powerlines, causing more destruction.

I recently ran across an article on the increase in wildfires as related to climate change, and found out that we actually have two fire seasons in California, each with their own characteristic fire patterns. One is the Summer Fire Season, running from June through September, with sun-dried vegetation being susceptible to wildfires. And the second is the Santa Ana Fire Season, running from October through April. These Santa Ana fires are fueled by vegetation dried out during the summer months, with the fires having increased intensity due to hot, dry Santa Ana winds. These fires tend to strike more developed areas, therefore cause greater economic damage. Larger and more destructive fires due to the confluence of two powerful forces: fire and wind.

While we naturally think of fire and wind as being destructive forces—thanks to our local experience—we know that both fire and wind have beneficial effects, as well. We use fire for such productive things as cooking food, generating heat and energy, purifying metals, and a host of other purposes. And, of course, we know that fires in nature—as with wildfires—actually can have a positive effect of clearing out dead vegetation to make way for new life to occur. Similarly, wind can have positive effects as well, such as generating power and cleaning impurities from our air. Today’s account of the first Pentecost provides yet another image—a positive image—of what can happen when fire and wind converge at the same time and in the same place. Of the immense power that occurs when wind and fire come together for positive and constructive purposes.

Of course, the rush of wind and the tongues of fire depicted in Acts are merely physical signs or manifestations of something far greater going on: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the gathered assembly of the early Church. In this context, fire and wind are not forces of destruction, but are signs of something new and wonderful happening. Signs of new life for the Church in the aftermath of Jesus’ departure at Ascension.

Many passages of the Bible use the imagery of fire to indicate the presence of God. And to indicate that something new is happening. Moses first encountered God in the form of the burning bush, beginning a new path, not only for Moses, but for God's people. God led his people through the wilderness with a pillar of fire, leading them to a new life in the Promised Land. God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai in flames of fire, giving the Law that would guide the lives of God's people. Just to name a few instances. But today's appearance of God's Spirit in flames has a different quality. It was not just about an appearance to a single individual or to a collective body. Today, as indicated by individual tongues of fire appearing on the foreheads of those present, this coming of God's Spirit is more individual, more personal. It certainly has communal implications. But it also has personal implications for everyone present. And for everyone who receives the Holy Spirit thereafter.

While the account from Acts tells us what happened, it does not have so much to say about what it all means to the individual and to the community as a whole. One of the most prominent events of the day was that those present spoke of God's deeds of power in their own languages. And despite speaking many different languages, they were all able to understand what was being proclaimed. While this phenomenon is often connected to glossolalia, the speaking in tongues of a divine language, Luke describes these "tongues" as other languages with which to proclaim the Gospel to all the world, and thereby to evangelize the world. But not just that. Despite many languages being spoken on that day, the Spirit makes possible a new language of hearing available to all people. The universal language of the Gospel. The universal language of love as exemplified by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this, the Pentecost event challenges the world to a new way of listening to the voice of God and a new way of proclaiming his love.

Peter also adds his commentary on what those assembled had just witnessed and experienced. Quoting the prophet Joel, he says "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" (Acts 2.17). This gift of the Holy Spirit is given indiscriminately, without regard for gender, age, social status, or any other social barrier.

The further implication of Peter citing this ancient prophecy from Joel is that things are made new with the coming of the Holy Spirit. That those who receive the gift of the Spirit will prophecy, see visions, and dream dreams. That there will be, through the indwelling of the Spirit, a direct connection between the members of the believing community and God. Just as the Holy Spirit came to Jesus at his Baptism and remained with him throughout his earthly ministry, energizing him, inspiring him, providing that direct connection between him and his Father, so too will the transforming power of the same Spirit come upon and become an integral part of the disciples and the community of the newly forming Church. A Spirit that will guide them and inspire them to find new ways to live into and continue the ministry that Christ began. This is an imparting of the ongoing power of the risen Christ which will allow them, prompt them, inspire them, to continue Christ's ministry in their own unique ways. A ministry that will spread throughout the world. The life-giving power of Christ's love that will spread throughout the world, like a raging wildfire fanned and fueled by the wind.

The coming of the Holy Spirit into the lives of the faithful is not just a one-off event that happened at Pentecost. Rather, it is an ongoing event that occurs whenever we perform a baptism. The ongoing outpouring of the Spirit on the newest members of the Body of Christ. Just as will happen in a few minutes [at the 10:15 service] when we baptize Luciano Guglielmino as the newest member of the Body of Christ. When he, too, will receive the same Spirit that blew through Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. The same Spirit that blows through this place even now.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, further explains what this imparting of the Holy Spirit at baptism means for us. That the Spirit does not just become a part of us, but changes us. That through the Spirit, we “have received a spirit of adoption” and that in response, “when we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8.15b-16). This is the mystery of baptism. That through the Holy Spirit we are claimed as God’s own and welcomed into Christ’s body, the Church. Whereby we are given a new identity as brother, as sister, as beloved child of God.

Yes, we know something of the immense power when wind and fire come together. Not just the power of wildfires and Santa Ana winds. Those of us in the Church know of the real power of fire and wind. The power of the Holy Spirit imparted at Pentecost and at baptism. The power to create something new, the power to change lives, the power to transform us into someone new. Someone with the power of wind and fire in our souls, to bring Christ’s message of love to the world in our words and actions. With the power to change the world.