

Hearts Ablaze

May 30, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Acts 2:1-13

Pentecost. Otherwise known as every pyromaniac's favorite Bible story. And decidedly NOT a favorite story for those who are afraid of fire. To be perfectly honest, fire is not my favorite thing. I just find it so...inconvenient. Most of you know that I was born and raised in the desert – which, by definition, is a place that doesn't get much rain. It is dry. Which makes it a prime location for fires to break out – which is really annoying for hikers during the summer months when all the wilderness areas close due to fire danger. Fire can be scary. And destructive. And dangerous.

Fire is not always a bad thing, though. In fact, fire is actually *necessary* to the health of an ecosystem. At Tall Timbers Research Station in Tallahassee, Fla., researchers performed an experiment in which a 23-acre plot of land was not allowed to burn for 40 years. And it was really interesting what they discovered: during those 40 years, plant diversity fell by 90 percent and one species of bird, the red-cockaded woodpecker, disappeared entirely. There are a few different reasons for this:

- Birds and small mammals actually really love burnt and hollowed-out trees for their homes.
- A fire can serve to re-stabilize an ecosystem that's been damaged by invasive plant species – very often these foreign species can't withstand the kinds of fire that burn their way through an area while the native plants will have developed some natural protections. And so the fire will serve almost like a deep clean for the forest, taking out the species that are not supposed to be there and that are competing for nutrients, and will leave the species that are critical to the ecosystem.
- A fire clears out the underbrush, and helps nutrients from dead and decaying trees return to the soil.
- It also thins the canopy of the forest – when the leaves of the trees get too thick, the sunshine can't reach the forest floor. A fire will thin the canopy so that the rest of the forest can get vital nutrients from the sun.
- Because trees can't run away from a fire, in more fire-prone areas some trees have adapted to withstand fire. The Ponderosa Pine, for example, has developed an extra-thick bark with a fire-resistant sap that helps protect the tree from the flames.
- Some pine trees actually rely on fire to propagate. Several trees produce a pinecone that is literally glued shut, with the mature seeds encased inside. When a fire comes through this gluey substance melts and releases the seeds. Other species of pine produce seeds with extra-hard shells that require a fire to come through to burn through the coating so that the seed can germinate.

I think this is fascinating. For all of the Smokey Bear coloring books that I got all through elementary school – “Only YOU can prevent forest fires” – who knew that forest fires actually contribute to the health of a forest?

This said, fire is still scary, and it is still destructive, and unpredictable, and dangerous, especially if it gets out of control. My little sister actually lost her home to an out-of-control forest fire that swept through her town back in 2012. And I remember back when I was in high school a major fire broke out in Los Alamos, NM – home of the Los Alamos National Labs where the first atomic bomb was developed, and where they still do nuclear research. It was a fire actually started by the Park Service, and it was supposed to be a controlled burn, but the “controlled burn” got out of control. A lot of people lost their homes in that fire and the town was absolutely devastated, but the really scary thing about that particular fire was – what if the lab goes up in flames? That would be a really BIG BOOM. An out-of-control fire can be absolutely devastating.

And one of the best recipes for a potentially beneficial fire to burn out-of-control is when we mix drought conditions with wind. When the fire has an almost unlimited source of fuel because there is no water to contain it, and then the winds come along and spread it. That’s when it gets scary.

And that’s what brings us to our scripture reading today.

“When the day of Pentecost had come...”

So, “Pentecost” literally means “the 50th day – specifically, the 50th day after the feast of Passover. Jesus has just ascended into heaven, and then now, about a week and a half later, the disciples are all gathered together, still trying to get their bearings. The last few months have been a whirlwind for them. They went from being the happy-go-lucky foot-in-mouth guys who followed Jesus around wherever he went, to the celebrations of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to walking alongside Jesus in his grumpy moments as he overturned the tables in the temple and cursed fig trees, to the last supper, praying in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus’ arrest, his trial, his death. All that would have been enough, but then Jesus rose from the dead. He came back and spent more time with the disciples and gave them a new mission and a new purpose and a new reason for being, and then Jesus disappeared again. He was taken up into heaven and hidden from the disciples’ sight. And then an angel came to them and says to them, “Hey! Stop staring up into the clouds! You have work to do! Get to work!”

I imagine the disciples feeling sort-of like I would always feel in school in the day or two after finals week. After all this work-work-work-study-study-study-preparing-and-cramming-for-tests, there would always be this moment that lasted for a few days after all the tests were over when I would have no idea what to do. My mind and body were still amped up – probably from all the caffeine that I’d been drinking to stay awake late into the night studying – and I had this feeling of hyper-alertness and a rush of

adrenaline that hadn't fully gone away yet, and this sense that there was *something* that I needed to be doing. And I had no idea what that was.

The disciples have been on high alert for months. It's been one thing, after another, after another for them. Excitement, followed by devastation, followed by disbelief, followed by joy, followed by loss. Throw in there a good measure of grief and pain and fear and sleeplessness and all their assumptions about life and death being thrown to the wind and we have the disciples at the beginning of today's story. Jesus has ascended into heaven and the disciples are left alone again.

I don't think I would necessarily characterize them as being in a drought of the soul – they certainly weren't dry or lifeless, but they were spent. They were emotionally and spiritually exhausted. If I had been one of them, I'm guessing I would have felt like I had no more of myself to give. I would've wanted to crawl into a hole for awhile, and rest. And then maybe, down the road a bit, I'd crawl back out again and think about what might come next for me.

So the disciples are worn out after all the events leading up to this day. They're all together in one place, and suddenly a sound like the rush of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

And then, 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.

Now, we have absolutely no idea what this scene literally looked like. Artists have had a lot of fun with painting what it sounds to them like the book of Acts describes, but the reality is that there is something happening here that is beyond description.

And what's described for us here is a recipe for something big – something dynamic – something life-altering and possibly life-giving, and very likely dangerous.

- We have the disciples who are worn out, spent. Maybe a little bit dry.
- We have wind.
- And we have flame.

Dry ground. Wind. And flame.

This is the point when all volunteer firefighters in the area would turn on their pagers and get all their gear ready to run out the door at a moment's notice. Because *something* is going to ignite. Those tongues of fire aren't going to be content to rest on the disciples and then fizzle out. That fire is going to burn, and the violent wind from heaven is going to spread that fire out of control.

It starts when the disciples start speaking different languages that they neither know nor understand. And right off the bat, some people start to get scared and try to control the fire: “These guys are drunk! Or crazy.”

But the fire continues to spread. New disciples are added to their numbers. What started with twelve exhausted guys and maybe a few women turned into more than 3,000 by the end of the day, and kept growing more and more each day. The wind continued to blow, and the fire grew hotter, and this budding new church started to organize itself. All the believers got together and shared everything they had with one another. They cared for those who were in need. They ate together with joy and began to form a community.

And then one community turned into two, which turned into four, and this wildfire spread from this little room where the disciples were gathered to “Jerusalem, and then all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Both Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, men and women, old and young – everybody was affected and the world would never be the same again, as the fire of God’s grace worked to consume what was dry and invasive and unnecessary, to clear a path in the forest canopy of our souls for the light of God’s love to penetrate the ground on which we walk, and to open up those spaces that we keep closed off and glued shut.

Friends, do any of you feel like you have been through a wildfire recently? Obviously, we can all point to the pandemic as the big, glaring, blazing fire that swept through the whole world and turned everything upside-down, and we are going to be recovering from that for a long, long time. But I’ve also had conversations with a lot of you, who have said that – as hard as it has been; as frustrating as it has been; as much as we would not have chosen it for ourselves and never want to re-live it all over again; as much as we grieve with those who have suffered sickness and loss of all kinds as a result of it, in a lot of cases, for a lot of us, we have found ourselves oddly renewed. As if there was a lot of underbrush in our lives, that needed to be cleared out. Maybe a thick canopy over us that was blocking out the sunshine. Maybe in some of us, there was new growth ready to burst forth, if only the sticky sap around us, keeping us stuck in our habits and routines, would melt away and free us to plant and germinate and grow. For a lot of us, as much as we didn’t like it and wouldn’t wish it on anybody, a fire in our souls is exactly what we needed to allow us to grow.

But then, there are others of us who aren’t feeling revitalized – and are instead feeling really, really “dry” right now. We might express that in different ways: “I want the passion back that I used to have,” or “I used to feel like there was a fire inside of me, but now it feels like that fire is gone.”

And let me start by saying that if this is you, some of that is normal. When lighting a campfire, often that initial blaze when the kindling goes up in flame is the biggest and

the most impressive and the most exciting, but that kindling isn't very substantive and it burns itself out pretty quickly. But if we've done a good job building that fire, that kindling will light some of the bigger, deeper logs on fire. And when they burn it will take longer for them to catch fire and the initial blaze won't be as impressive, but they are the fuel that will sustain the fire, and provide the heat that will last.

I think sometimes we are looking for that first exciting blaze of kindling when our fire has actually gone much deeper.

But here's the second thing: Sometimes it is in the driest patches of life that we find ourselves most ripe for the movement of the Spirit. A fire needs three things to burn: Heat, oxygen, and fuel. God brings the tongues of fire and the wind of God's breath, but we bring the fuel for the fire. And as we know, the drier something is, the more easily it will burn. I have found that for myself, my experiences of God have been the most profound during the hardest seasons of life; when I have the least of myself to give.

So today, may the flame of God's love come to rest on each of us. May the wind of God's Spirit blow us in new directions. May everything inside of us that is blocking out the Son of God be cleared away in a giant blaze of God's glory, and may we discover anew and afresh the nurturing, lifegiving presence of the Spirit of God within us.