

The Day of Pentecost  
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Year C, RCL

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Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Words are an amazing thing. By them we can transmit our hidden thoughts and feelings to another person. They have the power to wound or to heal, to inspire, to pass on information, to share wisdom. In John's Gospel the second Person of the Trinity is called the Word. And today's reading from the same gospel records the most outrageous, shocking utterance of Jesus: "When you have seen me you have seen the Father." If you want to know about God, look at me. This, too, is a word.

The point of the story of the Tower of Babel is to explain why there are so many languages among people. It is probably a mistake to infer from it that God likes confusion and discord. It probably came into being when a bunch of nomadic shepherds wandered into Mesopotamia and saw an incomplete Ziggurat. Either it had never been completed, or it had fallen into disrepair. Taking a jaundiced view of city life in general, they told a story about how God disapproved of people trying to climb to heaven. The warning is against undue pride, not against open communication. Nevertheless, the result of such overweening ambition is the breakdown of communication and the sundering of relationships. Not only was the building project abandoned, but the people were scattered.

The events of the Feast of Pentecost in the year 29 A.D. have many meanings for us. One of the most important is the healing of the divisions that existed ever since the Tower of Babel. The disciples speak, and miraculously, those listening each heard the apostles'

message in their own language. God made communication across linguistic and national boundaries possible. With that communication comes the possibility of forging new relationships of understanding, cooperation, and affection.

This is made possible by the coming of the Holy Spirit. It came with the sound of a rushing wind and appeared in the form of tongues like fire resting on each of the apostles. In that moment, the band of frightened, abandoned disciples of a slain criminal are transformed into death-defying messengers of a divine message. Indeed, to my mind the most convincing evidence for the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the transformation of the disciples from fearful to bold. You don't act as the apostles did if you are not absolutely convinced of the truth and importance of your message.

Pentecost is often called the birthday of the Church because the Church is fundamentally a creation of the Holy Spirit. Until the Holy Spirit comes and breathes divine life and fire into a group of people, they are just a group of people. After the Holy Spirit comes, we are a force to change the world.

The Jewish feast of Pentecost was the time that the first fruits were offered to God. In a sense we are the first fruits that Jesus offers to God. He planted the seed and nurtured it. It sprouted and now with coming of the Holy Spirit we can become life-giving bread for the world.

But in the end it is the fire that catches my imagination. The burning bush of Moses, the chariots of fire of Elijah, the flaming seraphim of Isaiah, and the flame that flares up in the human heart from time to time. My father was both a chemist and an outdoorsman. As a boy, I remember a camping trip with him when we were struggling to get a fire going in the midst of some heavy rain. I was getting discouraged, and he asserted as a scientific fact,

“anything will burn if you get it hot enough.” He went on to converse about threshold energies for the oxidation of various materials. And, sure enough, he got the soggy wood to burn. The fact of the matter is that sometimes the wood of my heart is nice and dry and ready for the spark of God’s match. But at other times, my heart is soggy wood, and God has to use something more like a blow torch to ignite me. It is the nature of God’s mercy, that God will use whatever it takes to get us burning.

In the fourth century there was a movement Christians to become monks living in isolated communities in the Egyptian desert. It became the practice for one person seeking advice on how to become more holy to go to another older person called an Abba or Father if a male, or and Amma or Mother if female. You would go to the old man or woman and ask for a word, and the Abba or Amma would respond. Or not. The sayings of these desert fathers and mothers have been collected. One goes like this:

*Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray ad meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, If you will, you can become all flame.”*

We are sent into the world by Jesus just as Jesus was sent by the Father. We are sent with same mission: to reconcile the world to God, to break down barriers and to build relationships. We do it with same resources, the grace of God and the Holy Spirit. When we build relationships using the power of the Holy Spirit, we build them with the intimacy and gentleness of human breathing. We build them with all the power that called the Creation into being and brought order and beauty out of chaos. We build these relationships by speaking so we can be understood, meeting people where they are. We save the world by igniting people's hearts with the fire of divine love. We often think of love as a warm feeling. Not God's love. God's love is a flaming passion. This is the fire of

the Song of Songs that many waters cannot quench. That is the love we need to save the world from its cold. And when fire and wind come together, there is the furnace in which all the dross is burned away from our gold or silver. It is the furnace in which our brittle iron is forged into flexible steel. May this building, this altar, this community be the furnace in which we are made ready for mission and service in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the challenge, promise, and hope of Pentecost—wind and fire from God to transform our bodies, minds, and souls to express God's love for all the world. Let us speak with boldness the truth of God's love as we have known it in our lives. Let us give ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit, ignited with God's love, and made all flame.

We are God's incendiary devices. We are sent to bring fire to the earth. We are sent to enflame people with love for God and each other. Let's go start some fires. Anything will burn if you get it hot enough. Amen.