

Romans 8:22-27 ~ Acts 2:1-21

Fire Power

May 23, 2021 ~ Day of Pentecost ~ Holy Communion

Introduction to Scripture:

“Wait for it.” That’s what my eldest daughter, Emily, says to me when I jump in too quickly, too impatiently in the middle of a story she is telling. You may recall, that’s what Jesus said to his disciples last Sunday, when we heard the scripture in Luke, his last words to his disciples before his ascension into heaven. “In a few days from now...wait for the gift my Father promised.” But who likes to wait? We get anxious, impatient—we wonder how long it’s really going to be, or if it’s ever really going to happen.

Well, today the wait is over. That’s the story you are about to hear. Jews had gathered together in Jerusalem from all over to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, also called the Feast of the Weeks or *Shavuot* in Hebrew. The Jewish Feast of Pentecost is the end of the seven-weeks between Passover and Shavuot, commemorating the day they were finally released from slavery in Egypt and given instructions on how to live as freed people, guided by the Torah, the love letter from God. That’s what they had come to celebrate on the day our story takes place. They did not know this was the day God’s promised gift would arrive. Nor did they have any clue how it would happen.

We are about to witness our Pentecost story from Acts 2, in word, sound effects, and body moves. When the gift of the Holy Spirit surprised, confused, and literally lit up those who had gathered that day for their traditional Feast of Pentecost.

Communion Meditation

Maybe we should start with the groaning. Paul uses the raw, deep body groan of a woman in labor, to describe all of us and all of creation. Regardless of your gender or whether or not you have ever actually gone into labor to deliver a baby, we all know what it feels like to be exhausted and to be in pain. As exciting as the Holy Spirit sound and light show on the Day of Pentecost surely was (and we will get to that) today, let’s begin today with the groaning: the groaning of exhaustion and pain.

Some of us may be in pain right now, and many of us I am sure are exhausted to the bone: whether from nursing a baby through the night, or from caring for an elderly parent around the clock. Whether it’s from overwork, underwork, anxiety, loss, isolation, or depression: all these and more, feed into our collective exhaustion. And after fifteen months under the cloud of the COVID pandemic, we are done with the virus and its consequences. Whether or not it is done with us. Fed up. Tired of it. Tired of waiting for it to be over. Depleted by the deepening racial and political division and discord that threatens the health of our body politic. As civil rights heroine Fanny Lou Hamer famously put it: we are “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

Here's the gospel truth for us today: As tired as we may be: *the waiting, the groaning and the exhaustion* are the beginning of a birthing process. As the prophet Isaiah put it, "those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." (Isaiah 40:31). You want to mount up with wings like eagles? Would you like to run and not be weary? Walk and not faint? As crazy as this may seem, the flame of the Holy Spirit is ignited in the waiting. The dawn of greater understanding begins in the quiet of trusting the promise. Even if we are stretched into a place we'd rather not go. And of being willing to not know exactly the when or the how. Waiting, with eyes and hearts wide open, provides the air that can ignite the flame of the Holy Spirit. Are you tired of the shouting, the shoving, the misfires, the misery of misunderstanding? At the center of the church's birth story that we just read from Acts 2 is the shock and awe of Fire Power. Not the kind that destroys and destructs. The shock and awe of people who speak different languages being able to understand one another.

Teilhard de Chardin, the 20th century French Jesuit who was a scientist and a theologian, suggested that "fire was one of the greatest discoveries in all of human history." In Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's sermon at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on May 19, 2018, he proclaimed: "If humanity ever harnesses the energy of fire again, if humanity ever captures the energy of love, it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire."ⁱ

This is what we are waiting for and groaning to bring forth here in our lives: the fire power of love that God ignited on Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit in Wind and Fire to blow open new doors of understanding and communication between all those different groups. Did you notice how their first response was to dismiss them, "they must be drunk" or to cancel them, "aren't these just a bunch of backward Galileans?" They were not ready for this kind of fire. Are we, 2,000 years later?

I was heartened by the news I read in the New York Times this week that, "the pandemic is in retreat. Victory is close. Although future outbreaks are possible, and 600 Americans are still dying from COVID every day, we are in what is called the "exponential-decay" phase now." Praise be to God! Yet, as we begin to traverse the new and uncharted terrain of reopening, of life with the COVID pandemic on retreat: We wait, we groan, and we hope. Perhaps we are all spiritually pregnant with what God longs to birth among and between us. The pandemic has laid bare cultural, racial, political differences in new and troubling ways. Maybe this is part of the groaning that will birth this second fire: the Holy Spirit fire of Love Divine.

Are you waiting, wondering what is next in your life? What is next for your family, our church, our country? From the waiting, out of the groaning, the new thing begins. Whether we are being called to open our minds and hearts to new ways of understanding another person, or what it means to be church: it's hard work. It involves labor and stretching. In ways we don't want to be stretch.

But isn't that the Fire Power that we need to fuel the church that God is calling us to be today? I believe that we are at an inflection point in our history. Reinhold Niebuhr, pastor,

teacher, and significant theological voice in the 20th century described the challenge of following Jesus who calls us to practice radical love with others as “the impossible possibility.” Think about the person or group of people you can’t understand. Perhaps it’s the flag they choose to fly. Or the mask they choose to wear or refuse to wear. The causes they choose to march for, or the memes they choose to post. Our story in Acts 2 is specifically about diversity within one faith, in this case, the diversity of Jews who had come from everywhere. A faith without diversity where everyone must agree and think the same way is not a faith, but a cult. Friends, the Pentecost fire did not birth a cult. We believe that we, the church, were birthed that day.

The energy of Divine Love to fire up understanding: that is the gift and the shock of Pentecost. Peter Gomes teaches us, “Pentecost reminds us that the gift of understanding, that gift transcends logic and diversity, is the gift of the spirit of unity: union with God..., with our sisters and brothers everywhere.” Gomes also makes this crucial point: “understanding of the other” does not take away our identity, our particularity, but rather, in our diversity we become more than we have been because as we understand each other, we grow into a larger community which expands us and our world.”ⁱⁱ

As the church, here’s the question I hear, being asked of us this day, “Are we content to live with the status quo? Are we willing to settle in and live with the deep and deepening suspicion and hostility toward those who differ from us? Or are we willing to wait, to groan, to stretch ourselves to receive the gift of understanding that can shape our relationships? The fire power of Pentecost is stronger than the one that seeks to exploit our differences and drive us further apart.

My husband has a PhD in English. You may not realize that he also holds an honorary doctorate in fire building. Over a half century of amazing campfire building, from boy scouting, to being a father, a professor, now a grandpa. One thing I have learned, watching him build and tend a campfire, is something you probably already know as well. What happens if a fire is not tend, poked, stoked? It goes out. The same holds true for Holy Spirit fire power. The waiting, the groaning, are part of the tending of the Pentecost fire. The suffering, the groaning, the waiting and the need for resurrection are things we share even with those we least understand.

Come to this table, tend the fire within. Let the fire of Pentecost lead us into the birthing process of which we are all a part.

ⁱ *Christian Century*, June 20, 2018, p.19

ⁱⁱ Joseph S. Harvard III, “An Impossible Possibility,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2019, pp. 8-9.