

Now About That Fire!

The Pentecost Sunday sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented June 4th, 2017, at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Acts 2:1-7, 12-21

I don't know if you've ever had the slightly embarrassing experience of having someone give you a gift, only to find out when you opened it, you did not have the foggiest idea what it was or what it was for. I mean, there you are: at your birthday party, and someone hands you a colourful wrapped package. As you pull off the ribbon and the wrapping paper, all the eyes in the circle are on you. You open the box and there it is.... But is it a pencil sharpener or a coffee grinder? A scarf or a bread napkin? Earrings or fishing lures? Of course, the person who gave you the gift is looking at you with eager anticipation, as if to say, "Well, do you like it?" And finally, out of courtesy, you have to say something, so you say, "Oh, how could you have known? Thank you so much. I can really use a tire pressure gauge..." Only to have a wounded voice say, "Tire gauge?! That's a meat thermometer!"

On Pentecost, in dramatic fashion, something has been given to the church, a gift from God. But when we opened it up, what is it and what's it for? The gift is the Holy Spirit, of course. And what about that Pentecostal fire? Is it a fire that burns to ash? Is that what will happen to the disciples and their Pentecost fervour? Is the day a flashover that will eventually burn itself (and them) out — go out in a blaze of glory? Is it, rather, a flame and sparks a witness that against all cultural and societal odds will birth Christ's church? Come, Holy Spirit, come!

There is something of the same uncertainty and perplexity, in a much deeper sense, about Pentecost. What's it for? You heard the story — the leaders of the early church all gathered in one place, when suddenly there was the sound of rushing wind like a tornado, then tongues of fire appeared resting on every head, and each one of them began speaking the gospel in other languages.

Some people are fascinated by the drama of this story, and any Boy Scout will tell you when laying a fire, light the upwind side so the wind blows and fans the flame deeper into the "fuel". The power of the wind moving like a freight train through the congregation, of tongues of fire resting on people's heads. And you say, "Ah, I know what the gift is! The gift of Pentecost is the gift of energy and excitement in the church." Pentecost is God's way of shaking the moss off the church, blowing the cobwebs out of the sanctuary, and allowing excitement to energize the church. Well, if that's the gift, God knows we need it: energy and some excitement in the church!

Thomas Long, the well-known American preacher tells of a Pentecost Sunday years ago when his family and he were at worship. "My children were very small then; and on this particular Pentecost Sunday, the minister had decided to infuse a little drama into the reading of the Pentecost story in the Book of Acts. My children", says Dr. Long, "were already a little bored by that point in the service, lazily coloring on their bulletins with crayons, but when the loud sound of that wind kicked up, they snapped to attention

and began looking around the sanctuary. When the minister read about tongues of fire landing on people's heads, there were people planted in the congregation who had hidden in their purses and coat pockets little red, flashy pom-poms, and started waving above their heads. Then some people in the congregation, some of them from Europe, some from Asia, some from Africa, stood up and began to speak in their own native tongues. At this point, of course, the children were practically standing on the pew and looking around. When the minister finished the choir began to lead us in a gentle rendition of 'Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew' when suddenly a man stood up in the balcony, laughed rudely and raucously at the congregation, saying 'they must be drunk on new wine!' The children, now far from being bored, were beside themselves with excitement. When we left worship that day", Dr. Long writes, "my son David, who was just a little boy then, turned to me and said, 'Wow, Dad! That was really church! And it wasn't boring!'"

Well, I truly understand. There is something weighty and heavy in the life of the church. I mean, if we're not talking about the stewardship program and how to balance the budget in these perilous economic times, we're talking about paving the parking lot. And when we aren't bound up in those little disputes, we're trying to face staggering problems in the world like war and poverty and terrorism. And it begins to weigh us down. Wouldn't it be nice to be lifted up and to have the life of the church flying like a flag, snapping in the powerful wind of the Spirit, with energy and excitement? Maybe that, in itself, is the gift of Pentecost!

When Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross was writing her famous book on death and dying, part of her research involved interviewing dying patients in the hospital, trying to find out how they felt and thought as they faced death. As she went from room to room in the hospital, she began to notice a remarkable pattern. Sometimes she would go into a dying person's room and the person would be calm, at peace, and tranquil. She also began to notice that often this was after the patient's room had been cleaned by a certain hospital orderly.

One day, Dr. Ross happened to run into this orderly, and she said to her, "What are you doing with my patients?"

The orderly thought she was being reprimanded by the doctor, and she said, "I'm not doing anything with your patients."

"No, no," responded Dr. Ross. "It's a good thing. After you go into their rooms, they seem at peace. What are you doing with my patients?"

I just talk to them," the orderly said. "You know, I've had two babies of my own die on my lap. But God never abandoned me. I tell them that. I tell them that they aren't alone, that God is with them, and that they don't have to be afraid."

There's the gift at Pentecost: a Word to speak in the brokenness and tragedy of the world, a word of good news and hope that is unlike any other word.

When I was the brand new pastor of a small church, I was asked to take a Sunday School Class of a teacher who could not be there to lead the class that met before the Sunday Service. I went to the classroom not knowing what to expect or what we might talk about. There were only three elementary school children, little girls, waiting on me for the class. It was the week before Pentecost Sunday, so I said to them, "Do you girls know what Pentecost is?" They didn't. "Well, Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and a hurricane wind and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads and they spoke in all the languages of the world." Two of the little girls took that rather calmly, but after an awkward silence one of them got her eyes as big as saucers. And when she could finally speak, she said, "Reverend Rodgers, we must have been absent that Sunday!"

The beautiful thing about that is not that she misunderstood. The beautiful thing is that she thought it could have happened in our church, that God's Spirit could have come even to our little congregation and given us a word to speak that the world desperately needs to hear. Come, Holy Spirit, Come!

Let us pray. O God our creator, the earth has many languages, but your gospel proclaims your love to all nations in one heavenly tongue. Make us messengers of this good news. Give us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that when we speak to our children and to those we love, and when we speak to our neighbors and to all the world, we will have something to say that brings hope and faith. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.