



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., *Rector*

Earth, Wind, & Fire

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 23, 2021
The Day of Pentecost; Whitsunday
Based on Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

I offer that prayer before almost every sermon I preach, but there's no Sunday when it's a more appropriate petition than it is today: the great feast of Pentecost. "Come Holy Spirit and kindle the fire that is in us." This is the day when we celebrate God's Fire and Wind upon the earth, the unquenchable, untamable power of the Holy Spirit left to us as the enduring presence of God, following Christ's Ascension into heaven.

The American preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it."ⁱ There is nothing small about this. The Holy Spirit is a profound mystery which always remains a little bit outside even our best efforts to comprehend it. We know it's described as a helper, a comforter, an advocate. It's the abiding presence of God, the breath breathed into us which animates us and gives us life.

For the uninitiated, today's celebration of the Holy Spirit, this Pentecost, creeps up without a whole lot of fanfare. I love what Peter Leithart wrote when he said, "Pentecost is culturally invisible. There are no Whitsunday sales at the department stores, no gift exchanges around lighted trees, no jolly elves, no crèches, no heart-warming Hollywood holiday films with Jimmy Stewart, no Bing Crosby crooning about the rushing mighty winds...

"...We dress up our kids as shepherds, as Mary and Joseph, for the annual Christmas pageant. We put them in armor to be Roman soldiers at the open tomb. But I've never seen a kid with a flaming head and speaking in tongues in a Sunday school play."ⁱⁱ

Pentecost *should* be one of the most overwhelming of all the great feasts of the Church, because this is the day when we remember one of the most chaotic and harrowing moments of the Early Church. The Book of Acts says the believers were "all together in one place 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." And if that wasn't unsettling enough, they all began to understand one another, people from every nation under heaven

living in Jerusalem. They all began to hear one another speaking about God's deeds of power, and they understood every single word that was said in their own language, as tongues of fire danced upon their heads.

I think this new "understanding," this miracle of insight, may well have been the most terrifying part of the whole experience. Just think of it!

- What do you do when it's shown to you that the world works differently than you always thought it worked?
- What do you do when the boundaries of reality are moved within your seeing and hearing? "Am I going crazy? Or was that really the power of God as revealed through the Holy Spirit?"
- What do you do when you learn that people you've never understood or trusted before turn out to be just as full of truth and goodness and God as you are?
- What do you do then?

That great ancient preacher John Chrysostom said, "So now the Holy Spirit descends upon (the people of God) in fiery tongues to unify a divided world. The result is something new and strange." New and strange indeed. Why, Archbishop Chrysostom, you don't know the half of it! Because some 2000 years later, we're still working, by the power of the Holy Spirit, on this "new and strange" mission to "unify a divided church, to unify a divided culture, to unify a divided world.

The Israeli diplomat Abba Eban once said, "History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives." We are seeing the truth of his statement right now in the Middle East, where we observe great violence and far too little wisdom.

One of my greatest (and most consistent) failures as a preacher has been my singular inability to help my listeners understand that the amazing things that happened in biblical times are *still* possible in our time! Perhaps it's because I can scarcely believe it myself. We *almost* believe it, but no one wants to say it out loud with any real confidence. It reminds me a little of the Norwegian farmer who loved his wife so much, that he almost told her once.

There's always something hazardous about God, especially in the form of the Holy Spirit, a fact seldom preached by the smiling televangelists who promise us the Christian faith is certain to make us wealthier, and more attractive, and, very likely, much thinner, too. That, by the way, is the "fool's gold" of a theology which doesn't dig deep enough to discover the real treasure of authentic faith. Bad theology is really just a cheap alloy that is burnt cleanly away and consumed by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is often called "the birthday of the Church," and there is a lot of conversation about the future of the Christian Church in this moment. Thomas Wedel wrote a challenging parable way back in 1953, which I believe may have lessons for us today as we consider the *Pentecost effect*.

"On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, really, and there was only one boat. But the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and, with no thought for themselves, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous.

"Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and their money and their effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews were trained and the little lifesaving station grew.

"Now some of the members of the lifesaving station became unhappy in time, however, because the building was so crude and so poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable, suitable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. And so they replaced the emergency cots with beds, and they put better furniture in the now enlarged building, so that the lifesaving station actually became a popular place for its members.

"They took great care in decorating it beautifully and furnishing it exquisitely, for they found new uses for it in the context of a sort of club. But fewer and fewer members were interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, and so they hired lifesaving crews to do this work on their behalf and in their stead.

"Now, please don't misunderstand. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decoration and symbols... there was a liturgical lifeboat, symbolic rather than fully functional, in the room where the club initiations were held, for example... so the changes did not necessarily mean that the original purposes were totally lost.

"About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold and wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and they were sick and they were of different races and ethnicities.

"The beautiful new club, as you might imagine, was thrown into chaos, so that the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club so the recent victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned-up before coming inside the main clubhouse.

"At the very next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities for being so unpleasant, as well as for being a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose, pointing out that, indeed, they were still called a lifesaving station.

"But these few were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. And so, they did precisely that.

"Now, as the years passed, the new station down the coast came to experience the very same changes that had occurred in the older, original station. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station had to be founded to restore the original purpose.

"Well, history continued to repeat itself so that if you visit the seacoast today, you will find a great number of exclusive clubs along that shoreline. It is said that shipwrecks in those waters are still frequent, but most of the people drown.

"'Mortal, can these bones live?' God once asked. Any resemblance to the state in which we find our own witness, scattered among the multiplicity of church 'clubs' today, is purely painful.

- What was the original 'rescue mission' that Pentecost is really about?

- How can we return to its purposes?"ⁱⁱⁱ

"O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

For the disciples, speaking in tongues was less about ecstatic unintelligible speech than it was about conferring the Divine ability to speak about God's deeds of power in Christ. Literally, they embodied this message. They not only preached the Word, they *became* the Word. And they knew the only *sure* sign of the Holy Spirit was not tongues of fire or rushing wind or charismatic gifts, but the presence of a costly, holy love.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, of blessed memory, doesn't mince any words on this subject. "The Holy Spirit will burn us. If we are to have vision, and if we are to have warmth of love, we must be exposed to the pains of burning. All that is unloving, selfish, hard, must be burnt out of our existence, burnt to destruction, burnt to ashes. The Spirit will burn its way into the core of our being in the ever-painful process of disclosure, of penitence, and of divine forgiveness. Only by such burning can our heart be fully exposed to the warmth and our mind be fully exposed to the light. There is no seeing and no warming without that burning. It is thus that we realize the saying of Jesus Christ found in one of the apocryphal documents; 'He that is near me is near the fire.'"^{iv} And whoever stands near the fire, feels the heat.

So, this morning, I offer a most solemn invitation: Come closer and stand nearer to this holy flame. See the tongues of fire. *Feel* the rushing wind. *Experience* the intensity of the heat. *Be opened* to the power of the Spirit.

Believe that what God did once, God can do again. Believe in that which you cannot understand or even see and join the faithful in embracing the Spirit of the Living God who, recognized or unrecognized, still burns in our very midst.

*Come Holy Spirit and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire.*

Amen.

ⁱ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Synthesis*, Yr. B, May 31, 2009, p. 3.

ⁱⁱ Peter Leithart, copied, original source unknown.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Synthesis*, Yr. C, May 23, 2010, p. 4.

^{iv} Archbishop Michael Ramsey, copied, original source unknown