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Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

May 31, 2020 Pentecost

What gets you fired up?

These days it seems like people are fired up about a lot of things. Simple requests are pushing people over the edge. I was in the line outside a certain grocery store two weeks ago, when a woman was asked politely by an employee to wear her mask that she was holding in her hands. She got fired up telling him she didn’t have to because she wasn’t inside the store yet. And perhaps you’ve seen the video of the customer who was asked to leave Costco who filmed himself bashing the employee, which backfired, as the employee became a hero for the way that he politely and calmly enforced their rules.

There’s nothing like the stress of a global pandemic, lost lives, lost jobs, and a crashing economy to fire people up.

But what is it that we are getting fired up about?

Fire is an image that seems to fit the times. Fire as a substance, can be both good and bad. Fires can destroy, like the wildfires we saw in Australia earlier this year which incinerated 6 percent, or 13.6 million acres of a state that ⅓ of Australians call home and killed an estimated 1 billion animals. For anyone who has ever had a house fire, you know how much fire, smoke, and then the subsequent water damage can do to your house. Fires destroy buildings, as we have seen in the Minneapolis protests this week.

But fires can also be useful and helpful - fires can provide us energy for transportation, or heat for our homes, or help us cook our food. And in a metaphorical way the fire in our spirit, in our bones, fuels us up, drives us to work hard, gives us energy to fight injustice, lights up our passions.

There are many images that are associated with Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Wind. Multiple languages. Breath. But it is the image of fire that captures my spirit this year.

The disciples were in Jerusalem after Jesus’ ascension, waiting for the gift that Jesus had promised them to come. Waiting with hope. Waiting with joy. Waiting with anticipation. Waiting together as a community. You might recall John the Baptist, the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus to come, telling his disciples that he baptized with water, but the one who would follow him, who is more powerful than he, would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. It is this moment for which the disciples are waiting.

And suddenly, The Spirit came. No proclamation. No warning. No announcement. No explanation. The Spirit came with the sound of roaring wind, and with tongues of fire which appeared among them. And as the tongues of fire rested on each of them, they were filled with the Spirit and given the ability to speak in other languages.

It must have been chaos, as languages were spoken over one another and witnesses wondered out loud if the disciples were drunk.

And yet, even in its chaos, it was not destructive. Faces were lit up, hearts were inspired, and voices were lifted up at the direction of the Spirit, speaking about God’s wondrous deeds of power and love in a multitude of languages that miraculously the disciples could speak and the crowd/hearers could understand.

So I ask again - What is it that you are fired up about?

What’s the story that you would tell?

When is your heart strangely warmed, your faces lit up, your passion engaged, your spirit fueled and on fire, and your voices lifted speaking with strength?

This week I was reading a commentary about this scripture that highlighted the history of our brothers and sisters who are part of the Pentecostal movement. So first, a short history lesson, The Pentecostal movement began with the preaching of W. J. Seymour - an African American traveling Holiness preacher who preached at Azuza Street in Los Angeles which led to a revival in 1906-1909. Azuza St. was unique in that blacks, whites, Mexicans, and Asians worshiped together in a time in which that just didn’t happen. Indeed it was a time of growing racial separation everywhere else. However, as whites grew uncomfortable with the diversity of leadership and preachers, eventually whites withdrew from this atypical interracial movement.

Not only did whites separate themselves out, but Seymour experienced growing attacks from white Pentecostal preachers. In the commentary *True To Our Native Land* pastor and professor Demetrius K. Williams wrote, this “caused him to rethink the power of speaking in tongues (glossolalia) alone as a force to eradicate racism and separatism.” While Seymour initially believed the speaking of tongues was the central evidence and sign of a baptism of the Holy Spirit, “discovering that people who spoke in tongues could still practice racism, convinced him that it was not tongues that were most important but, as Seymour himself wrote, ‘the dissolution of racial barriers that was the surest sign of the Spirit’s Pentecostal presence…’ ‘If you get angry, or speak evil, or backbite, I care not how many tongues you may have, you have not the baptism with the Holy Spirit.’” Genuine signs of the Spirit that he began to prioritize as a sign of having been baptized with the Spirit were the fruit of the Spirit Paul wrote about in Galatians - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-24).[[1]](#footnote-1)

There’s one line in there that bears repeating and meditating on this week: **“The dissolution of racial barriers was the surest sign of the Spirit’s Pentecostal presence.”**

*Come, Holy Spirit, come. We are so in need of your Pentecostal presence today.*

This week some things happened in our country that have fired people up.

There are those who are fired up about having to wear masks, claiming that they make it hard to breathe. They are hot, and uncomfortable, and perhaps do make it harder to breathe, but I wonder if we are as fired up about yet another black man’s life, this time George Floyd, which was ended this week with his words “I can’t breathe,” as a white police officer kneeled on his throat.

This week a white woman in a park got fired up when a black man asked her to put a leash on her dog in a place where leashes were required. She threatened to call the police and report that an African American man was threatening her, and then she did. She was discredited only because he was filming the whole situation and caught it all on tape. Given the situation in our country today and the fear and profiling that has led to excessive uses of force against our African American brothers in particular, he was lucky the situation did not turn out differently for him. Are we fired up, burning at the hatefulness and injustice he endured?

“The dissolution of racial barriers was the surest sign of the Spirit’s Pentecostal presence.”

I want to ask us again: What is it that we are fired up about?

What I’ve learned about fires since my days as a girl scout and camping with my family is that fires must be tended. They can be dangerous. They can either get out of control quickly or they can go out quickly if they aren’t tended to.

Some people like to play with fire. They are intrigued by its destructive nature. They like to strike matches and watch them burn. They like to pour gasoline over something already burning. Cause an explosion. They like to tweet something in 40 characters or less that starts something bigger.

And here’s where it gets hard. Because sometimes we all like to play with that kind of fire. There’s a little bit of human nature in us that likes the explosion. Somehow the 24 hour news cycle gets watched enough, and the people yelling over one another is entertaining enough that it keeps ratings up and so that style keeps being reinforced. Or, on a personal level, sometimes we share that tidbit of information we just know will cause someone else to react. Or we ourselves react in ways that are not full of the fruit of the Spirit.

It seems to me that God certainly does not want us to play with fire - at least not the destructive fire, not the kind that destroys lives.

But we are meant to tend the fire. We are meant to receive the fire of the Holy Spirit and tend to its presence in our lives. We are to let God’s refining fiery Spirit work on our hearts and in our lives so that we might be transformed.

How do we know if it is the fire of the Holy Spirit, the holy fire, that we are tending or that is burning within us or the destructive fire? As Seymour says, it’s not necessarily about the tongues. It’s about the fruit of the Spirit - the things that are increasing in us - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It is how we are being transformed - or not.

Pentecost is a day for rejoicing. It is the birthday of the church. It is the giving of the Holy Spirit. And in it we celebrate the democratization of all people. Peter’s words of explanation to the crowd about what was happening with the tongues of fire and the wind were taken straight from the prophet Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares

that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

    and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

and your young men shall see visions,

    and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,

    in those days I will pour out my Spirit;

        and they shall prophesy.

...Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

In other words, this fire is one that would change the disciples’ lives forever. It would change the world forever, in the way that a fire changes things dramatically so that they can’t go back.

Two thousand years later, on this Pentecost Sunday, The Spirit wants the same kind of transformation in you and me, that the Spirit worked in the apostles/disciples. It may not come in the same dramatic way with tongues of fire, roaring wind, and a multitude of languages, but if we let the fiery Spirit enter our lives, then we might become an undeniable source of good in this world, an astounding force for justice, a breathtaking spring of beauty, a stunning display of love - where all barriers, economic barriers, gender barriers, sexuality barriers, ability barriers, but **especially, racial barriers are dissolved,** where racial justice and equity are attained,

and where the fruit of the Spirit not only manifests in our lives, but flourishes. If we let the fiery Spirit enter our lives, and tend to its holy fire, together, we will be able to confront and one day overcome the fires that destroy, within ourselves, within our communities, within our systems, our nation, within our world, so that together we find liberation from sin and experience salvation and healing God offers.

Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

May the Holy Spirit light the fire in us that can change our lives. May that holy fire bring transformation so we become full of the fruit of the Spirit, especially full of the love that overcomes and endures all. And may we tend that holy fire, so that what we are fired up about, is what is essential in God’s heart.

1. Ideas and quotes from this paragraph come from the Acts section written by Demetrius K. Williams in the following commentary:

   Blount, Brian K. *True to Our Native Land: an African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)