

Born In A Fire

Today is Pentecost Sunday. The Feast of Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks, comes fifty days after the Feast of Passover. (Pentecost means fifty.) Remember at the time of the first Passover, the Jews were slaves in Egypt. Passover marked the moment when the blood of a sacrificial lamb was applied to the doorpost of all of the Jewish homes in Egypt and the firstborn son of all those covered by the blood of the lamb was spared but those homes not covered by the blood of the lamb suffered loss. As a result, the Pharaoh let the Israelites go and fifty days after they left Egypt they were at Mt. Sinai where God gave Moses the ten commandments and the law for the Jewish people. The Lord told them when they entered the promised land they were to keep this feast or festival, the feast of Weeks/Pentecost, bringing the first fruits of their crops as an offering to God, thanking him for the harvest and his provision for them, expressing their hope and confidence in the Lord for the fall harvest ahead. It began as a harvest festival but today in Judaism the focus is on celebrating the giving of the law at Sinai.

For us as believers, Passover reminds us of the sacrifice of another lamb, Jesus, the Lamb of God whose death on the cross atoned for our sins. His blood is applied not to the doorpost of our house, but to our heart and life where it covers and cleanses us from sin. Passover was about deliverance from Egypt for the Jews and is about deliverance from sin for us. Pentecost for us is about the birth of the church and spiritual empowerment. The original Pentecost was about the harvest and for us, Pentecost is still about the harvest. This time, not a harvest of grain, but a harvest of people, gathering those who don't know Jesus and need salvation. So, fifty days after Passover, fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection and ten days after Jesus' ascension into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of the Father in power and glory, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the believers, the New Testament church.

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” Acts 2:1-4

An extraordinary passage, isn't it? Luke, the author of the book of Acts, is doing his best to describe what had been told to him, trying to explain a spiritual reality and event that can only be explained or expressed by analogy. It was “like” this. Imagine trying to explain what

happened? “I don’t know. It was like a rushing, violent wind filled the whole house.” Then what happened? “I don’t know but it was like tongues of fire broke off from a larger fire or flame and came to rest on each of us.”

Tongues of fire! What did it mean? Frederich Buechner wrote, **“The birthday of the church took place in the midst of a terrible fire.” ... Frederick Buechner** What did the fire mean? Did they understand? This was all new, unprecedented for the disciples, perhaps frightening. Is God about to burn the place down? Is he about to burn us up?

They had heard about fire connected to Jesus. John the Baptist had said, **“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Matthew 3:11-12**

Unquenchable fire. Is this it? Is this part of the fire that is coming, to burn up the chaff? Fire to burn away sin and evil? We talk about how evil the world is today, how sinful, but think about it. The people in Jesus’ day were so evil they crucified the Messiah, the Son of God! They rejected his call to repent and turn from evil and from their sin. You would think a little unquenchable fire of judgement might be directed toward that first century crowd!

The Old Testament Prophet Isaiah declared, **“See, the Lord is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury and his rebuke with flames of fire. For with fire and with his sword the Lord will execute judgment upon all men and many will be those slain by the Lord.” Isaiah 66:15-16**

Peter said **“The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.” 2 Peter 3:7** The Lord is coming with fire, flames of fire. Is this it? Tongues of fire? Is this a sign of the beginning of judgment? Is God getting ready to settle accounts with the wicked and ungodly? Fire will speak of judgment, but not today. Not on Pentecost. This fire was different. This wasn’t judgment.

Fire has different properties and can produce different outcomes. Yes, fire can destroy. I remember the fire that destroyed Frankoma Pottery in Sapulpa where my Dad worked as the plant manager. He and I climbed back through the destruction to his office to see if anything remained of his personal effects. We saw red iron beams bowed from the intense heat. Fire can destroy, but the big kilns at Frankoma used fire to finish the pieces of clay pottery so they could

be useful. You can't drink from an unfired cup, you can't eat from an unfired plate. It will dissolve or break. Fire can destroy, or finish and complete. It depends on the use of fire.

Fire generates power. Firepower. In the early days, locomotives required fire to produce the steam to move the pistons to move the engine. Fire generates light. Illumination. You carry a torch or light a lamp in order to see where you are going or what you are doing. Fire generates warmth and warmth can comfort and calm and protect.

I think the tongues of fire on Pentecost were a sign that represented the coming of the Holy Spirit to do all those things. The Holy Spirit has come like the fire of the kiln, to finish and complete us so we can be useful to the Lord. The Holy Spirit comes to empower us, his church. Jesus said **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses...” Acts 1:8** The Holy Spirit brings power to move the engine. Power to live for him and like him, power to be his witnesses, power to proclaim Jesus, to take the good news of his saving grace to those who don't know, to take the gospel to those without hope.

The Holy Spirit has come to illuminate. In the Old Testament the Spirit of the Lord directed the Israelites by a pillar of fire at night, to illuminate and light the way. The Holy Spirit brings light to us, to show us the way. He enlightens us, enabling us to understand the word of God, to understand his call, his plan, his purpose. Jesus said, **“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth...He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.” John 16:12-14** Pentecost is about light, illumination, about power to bring the light of Jesus to a dark world. It's about the light needed to follow Jesus, to take the next step in faith.

Think of the warmth of a fire on a cold night. Fire generates warmth that calms and comforts us and the Holy Spirit has come to comfort us with His abiding presence. Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. He said we would not be left as orphans because the Comforter, the Holy Spirit would be with us and would dwell within us. What comfort the warmth of his presence brings! We aren't alone in this cold, dark world because the Holy Spirit is with us! His presence warms us. We aren't afraid in the dark because the Holy Spirit lights our path and chases away the fear. Thank God for the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The church is born in what Buechner called a terrible fire. Terrible, not bad or horrible, but terrible meaning severe, intense, frightening in a way that calls us to reverence; in the sense that this is not trivial but holy, important, urgent, necessary, this is life changing, life sustaining.

We can't continue without this fire. Like pottery, we won't be finished and complete without this fire. We won't have the power to be his witnesses, to live faithfully and courageously without this fire! We can't find our way in the darkness without the light from this fire. We should be frightened at the thought of trying to be the church without this fire! We need the fire of Pentecost. We need power, illumination, light, comfort, we need the fire of the Holy Spirit to burn within us! We need his fire, his anointing in us, upon us. We need a fresh Pentecost!

Let me quickly point out the difference the fire of the Holy Spirit made in the life of two of the disciples. Peter is one of Jesus' closest disciples yet we see Peter frightened at the Lord's trial. Warming himself by a fire in the courtyard of the High Priest, Peter is confronted, first by a servant girl and then by a servant of the high priest. "Didn't we see you with Jesus in the Olive grove? Aren't you one of the followers of Jesus? Aren't you a Galilean?" Three times Peter denies Jesus, denies knowing him or being a follower. Peter deserts Jesus in his time of need but Pentecost finds Peter in Acts 2 standing before the crowd that gathers. A different person with a boldness and a fire in him that comes only by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, Peter looks them in the eye and declares, **"You, with the help of wicked men, put him [Jesus] to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead."** Acts 2:23-24. He tells them they need to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins! What a difference the baptism in the Holy Spirit, the fire of Pentecost made in Peter. Passover and Pentecost. It was the true Passover, the blood of the Lamb that cleansed Peter and forgave his sin and his failure and it was Pentecost, the fire of the Holy Spirit that gave him boldness that made him useful. The fire of Pentecost moved him from calling down judgment, in the form of cutting off a servant's ear in Gethsemane, from fear, to being a bold witness of Jesus!

John is another of Jesus' closest disciples. He and Peter were often mentioned together. Traveling with Jesus on his final trip to Jerusalem, they pass through Samaria. We've spoken often of the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. To put it plainly, they despised one another. When the people in one of the Samaritan villages realized that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, they refused to welcome him or give him lodging. John and his brother James saw that the Samaritans had refused Jesus and their response was, **"Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" "But Jesus turned and rebuked them and they went to another village."** Luke 9:54-56

John was thinking of fire as judgment. Let's call down fire from heaven to consume the enemies. Have you been guilty of that kind of thinking? "Lord, do you want us to call down fire on the opposition, the democrats, the Republicans, the socialists, the Russians, the Palestinians, the liberals, the conservatives?" Let's call down fire on those who see things different from us, who are different from us. We are quick to want the fire of judgment but Passover and Pentecost are supposed to make a difference in us. They did in Peter and in John. From John wanting to call down fire on the Samaritans, fast forward to Acts 8. Philip the deacon has been preaching to the hated Samaritans and they have turned to Jesus and been born again. Peter and John come from Jerusalem to see and when they arrive, instead of calling down the fire of judgment on the Samaritans, this time John prays for them and calls down the fire of the Holy Spirit upon them. The bible says **"Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit."** Acts 8:17 John had come a long way from calling down fire in judgment to calling down the fire of the Holy Spirit's presence and power and blessing on the Samaritans.

The church was born in a fire. This is the kind of fire we need. Instead of fire to judge sinners, how about fire to empower us to witness, to testify of Jesus. Fire to enable us to announce that grace, redemption, mercy, forgiveness is available through faith in Jesus. The fire of Pentecost was so we would have the boldness to tell those who were enemies of God, who were our own enemies that they could come and be reconciled to God. God forgive us for acting like the Pre-Pentecost John. "God, can we call down fire on your enemies and on ours." God help us. We are people of Pentecost, born in a fire. "God, burn out the sin in us and transform us so we will call down the fire and blessing and presence of the Holy Spirit on our enemies." God will take care of the judgment someday, but right now God wants to send the fire of the Holy Spirit to empower us to proclaim Jesus and his forgiveness and redemption and reconciliation to everyone we meet. Let the fire of the Holy Spirit shine through us and make us witnesses of Jesus! That's the fire we need. We need the fire of the Holy Spirit. Instead of calling down the fire of judgement let's ask Jesus to baptize us with the Holy Ghost and fire. "Lord, send the fire of the Holy Spirit and empower us so we can win others to Christ! Lord, let us be born anew in a terrible, awe invoking, reverence producing, life transforming, life giving, life sustaining, unquenchable fire! Once again, we need to be born in a fire!