

Wildfire!

Acts 10:34-47

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We've all been horrified lately to see how the wildfires in Colorado have spread, rapidly destroying forests, animals, homes – with its hot, blazing flames. I heard this past week that some of the flames were as high as 87 feet!

It is truly amazing how one little spark can get a fire going and just how rapidly out of control it can become.

That is a sad illustration, but a good one, I think, to describe how fast the church began to grow once the spark was ignited. And what was the spark? It was first lit at Pentecost – after Jesus' resurrection and ascension – when the Holy Spirit came like tongues of fire and a mighty rushing wind. Those two factors combined obviously can start a wildfire that can get out of hand and spread out for miles and miles.

Once that spark of the good news about Jesus was lit, it went everywhere!

Today we hear about Peter who is absolutely on fire with the Holy Spirit in him, giving him power to be bold in his preaching. Peter has now had some amazing experiences with telling about salvation through Jesus Christ, about forgiveness, about God's love shown through his Son. He has had the opportunity to see thousands of Jews become believers in Jesus.

And not only that but now a Roman centurion – a soldier who, with Peter's help, became a believer and was baptized! This was an amazing thing – that God's message would even reach out to the Romans!

But wait! A further miracle happened. Peter is preaching to Jews and Gentiles (non Jews, who were looked at as pagans by the faithful Jews). He was telling them the story of how first John the Baptist, and then Jesus came with a new message of repentance and baptism, and how Jesus was the Messiah, how he was hung on a cross and died for the forgiveness of sins. He told them how he was raised from the dead and that there were witnesses who saw him alive – including Peter and the disciples.

And we are told that the Holy Spirit came upon all who were listening and opened up their ears for them to truly hear this message. And even the Gentiles became believers.

The Jews were amazed – couldn't believe the Holy Spirit would actually come upon Gentiles – but they saw it with their own eyes and heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. They had to believe it!

Peter asked if there were any objections to the Gentiles being baptized and they all agreed. This was huge! This was change to the max for Jews and Gentiles. What they always knew was not the same anymore.

As Peter said, God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone. “God shows no favoritism.”

What a message it is for us still today! There is so much good news in that message, we should be fairly bursting – as Peterson says in The Message about Peter – “practically exploding” with the good news.

The good news is for all of us, and that includes –

- We who have thought all our lives that we were doing things right, but are discovering we don't have all the answers after all
- We who have not been in church for a very long time
- We who have turned from God and ignored God and not thought to pray for a while now
- We who have done some things we know are against God's ways and will
- We who have never felt worthy of God's love and forgiveness because of shame, or a lack of self confidence
- We who have doubted that there is a God at all, who have wrestled and felt confused and ignorant of the Scriptures

All of us – the good, the bad and the in-between – have good news offered to us.

What is this good news?

God shows no favoritism. We are all loved, all equal in the eyes of our Creator. God came to earth through his Son to make it clear that we are his beloved, that we are his children, that he pours out mercy, forgiveness, salvation, new and eternal life, that he is always with us, always loving us, always drawing us to Himself.

It's true! Whether you accept it or not, it's true! You are loved beyond measure.

Can you imagine the Gentiles who were outcasts, who were looked down on and despised by the Jews – receiving this blessing to be baptized in Jesus’ name and to know that they now were part of the community of faith.

Outsiders becoming insiders. It was radical. It was new and unexpected and it meant great change for believers from that time on. The Jewish rules and regulations – that is ‘the way they had always done it’ – did they apply to the Gentiles? Should they be expected to eat or not eat the kosher foods? Should they be circumcised? Should they have to practice the rituals for purity?

That joyous occasion when the Gentiles experienced a radical hospitality moment led the church to a very new look, a new understanding and a new way of being. But it wasn’t easy to make the transitions. It took the Holy Spirit leading and working; it took dedicated, committed believers struggling through difficult discussions, arguments, even separations at times, to come to that place of transformation.

Of course, we know that after all these years we are, as the reformation says, “reformed and always reforming.” Nothing stays the same, does it? Neal Presa, the new moderator of our General Assembly said this: “we see and know change is inevitable, but our hearts are fearful.” So true!

Today, in this Digital Age, this new era with rapidly changing forms of communication, we see change happening in our culture and in the church so fast sometimes, it makes our head spin. The church has a way of trudging behind. We are reluctant to change – partly because we want church to be the one stable thing that doesn’t change, the thing we can count on to remain the same in an ever changing world. But we also question the theological implications.

Are we changing just because we go along with the culture? Is it against the Word of God? Are we weakening in our faith because of it? Are we Not being the true church because we look and act different than we have always been taught?

I think those are the underlying questions for those of us who have been steeped in certain religious tradition – very much like the Jews of the early church.

But let us continue to pray for the Holy Spirit to open our ears – and hearts and minds – to the new and exciting things God is doing with His beloved people. That includes new language, new ways of doing, singing, worshipping, doing fellowship, communication.

One thing that is for sure – the Message – the Good News never changes! We are all loved by God. We have salvation, life!, forgiveness, love, guidance, God’s Presence – every one of us, regardless of who we are. God has no favorites!

No matter how we get the message out there – whether it be by old ways or newer ways – we need to be bursting, exploding with the great good news of God’s amazing love so others will come to know it too!

We talked at Committee on Ministry this last week about the denominations new, hopeful goal: 1001 new churches! Someone suggested our Presbytery adapt a goal of 1001 baptisms this year. Wouldn’t that be amazing, if all the churches in the Presbytery of Lake Huron would have a total of 1001 baptism this year? That means we need to share the good news and bring them in for baptism and make disciples in the name of Jesus Christ!

Sounds like a huge challenge, doesn’t it? But, you’ve heard me say it before, and I’ll say it again and again – with the power of the Holy spirit, anything can happen – and it probably will!

Remember, it only takes a spark to get fire going!

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