

Wildfire©**Luke 24:44-53; Acts 2:1-21****May 20, 2018****Dr. Sharlyn Gates****PENTECOST SUNDAY**

Today is a most important day for the Church. Jesus had promised that he would send the Holy Spirit soon after he ascended into heaven and what an event that was!

Luke tells us in Acts 2 just how powerful the coming of the Spirit of God was. The 12 disciples – the 11, plus a new disciple they had chosen to take the place of Judas Iscariot, the one who had betrayed Jesus, and had then taken his own life – these disciples were waiting together just as Jesus told them to do.

They probably had gathered each morning for worship together, in secret most likely. But this morning was unlike any other.

It was a big day in Jerusalem as thousands gathered in the city from all over for the big Feast of First Fruits or, also known as the Feast of Pentecost. The Greek word “*pentekostos*” literally means “fifty” and it comes fifty days after the Passover.

Pentecost was the celebration of the early harvest that would sustain Israel until the fall harvest. It was one of the big festivals like Passover, and Jews from everywhere flooded the holy city for this feast.

But suddenly there was a roar and mighty rushing wind throughout the city and people were gathering together, wondering what was happening. And then there was something that seemed to look like tongues of fire that went to one location – where the disciples were gathered. It was like that fire just lit up each one of those 12 and they were changed.

They began to preach in every language of all the people there. They told the gospel – the good news about Jesus. They went through the scriptures and the prophecies and they told about Jesus’ death and his resurrection.

And people were puzzled because, here were these Galileans, probably not very educated, speaking in all their languages. And of course, some just claimed they were drunk.

And Peter was empowered to preach a sermon like no other. Here was Peter who just recently had denied even knowing Jesus. Who ran and hid for fear of the Jewish authorities coming after him next.

Oh, but look at him now! He is bold and he is loud and he is confident in what he is telling them. He goes back to the prophecy in Joel and points out that what Joel said would happen, is happening now.

God will pour out his spirit upon all people. And that time is upon us right now – in this very moment, he told them.

And many, many people – Luke says there were 3,000 who heard the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ – many became believers that day and were saved. And they returned to their own countries and shared the gospel there and the Church of Jesus Christ was born.

Because of the Holy Spirit, the good news spread like wildfire. It could not be contained. It could not be put out. It kept spreading no matter what those who opposed it did.

What started as tongues of fire that Pentecost morning kept getting bigger and wider and more and more powerful. The disciples and the early church would be tested over and over; they would be arrested, beaten, some would be killed for their faith in Christ, but the fire would keep on spreading.

It could never ever be put out.

When I think of wildfires I think of those scenes we've been looking at on television from Hawaii where the volcano has erupted and lava and flames of fire are spreading for miles and miles. It is frightening and it is sad. And there is nothing they can do about it except try to get out of the way.

Of course, we've also seen the wildfires in California, or the forest fires that spread so fast and can burn for weeks and weeks. So dangerous, so hot and damaging. They are powerful for sure.

But then I always go back to my roots. I think of spring nights when we would be out in the yard at the ranch I grew up on in Oklahoma. You could see for miles and miles because it was mostly prairie land – land that would either be used either for cattle grazing or for planting hay, Alfalfa, corn, or soybeans.

The ranchers, or farmers, would burn the old grass so the new grass could come up, or the land could be worked. Burning off the old is an important work in order for new things to happen.

I suspect the guys in my family really kind of liked playing with fire. They seemed unusually excited as they would go out the door in their old clothes and use that expression they had. They would just say "We're going out to burn." We all knew what it meant.

But it was kind of eerie at times to look at every horizon and see fires burning. They seemed to surround us. As a child, I was pretty nervous about it but was reassured that they were quite a distance away and under control.

Except, of course, when they got out of control. Then all the neighbors were called out and they would wet down gunny sacks and start beating at the fire to stop it. I helped with that a few times as I got older. And a couple of times the fire department had to come out and intervene.

Fire has always been an important factor in the lives of people. Fire stamps out the spread of disease, it powers our industry and our transportation on land and sea. It powers communication.

There has never been an age in the history of humanity that fire, once discovered and then harnessed, has not been the key of the advancement of man or time.

Think about it. Fire can be a powerful force for the use of good and for destruction as well. Scriptures talk about fire as a purifying element, but also as a way of destroying that which is no good. Like separating the wheat from the chaff. It is sifted out and the chaff is thrown into the fire to burn.

See, I think the wild, hot, powerful fire of the Spirit is like that. It came upon the disciples that day so long ago like tongues of fire that started this flame of passion for the gospel of salvation being told and it began to spread like a wildfire out of control and nothing could stop it and nothing and no one ever has been able to stop it. If it had, we would not be here today. The Church would not exist.

The Holy Spirit is a lot of things: a comforter when we are grieving; an encourager when we are afraid or uncertain; an eye-opener when we need to see the truth; an illuminator when we read the Holy Word of God; a power-giver when we need to be bold; and a disciplinarian when we need to be put in line.

On the ranch, there were those days when the cattle would be herded into the cattle chute so they could be vaccinated or loaded into the trailer to be taken to market. Sometimes they would try to go the wrong direction and as much as we don't like to think of animal cruelty, it was just the way it was. My dad would get that cattle prod and zap them with it to get them back in line. It didn't have fire but I'm sure it felt like it did.

I think the Holy Spirit can be a bit like that at times. It isn't always soothing and calm and comfortable. The Spirit is like the cattle prod when we go off in the wrong direction. It moves us back. It convicts us so we see how far we've wandered.

Or, if we're a bit slow in getting that message, the Spirit chastises us, purges us into that fire of feeling uncomfortable, until we finally turn back. God disciplines those whom God loves. And the Holy Spirit can zap us back in line if we need it.

Which is a good thing. We may not think so at the time, but we are God's children and he will not lose any one of us. Nothing can separate us from his love – even if it means a burning off of the old to grow the new in us.

It is the Holy Spirit that gives us that restless feeling when we are being called to serve – a feeling that we know something is happening. It is in our gut, it is hot and wild and disturbing.

Think of Saul who was persecuting and killing Christians – in the name of God. Who was on the road to Damascus when he was struck down by the power of the Holy Spirit – a bright and blinding light causing him to lose his sight temporarily.

The Holy Spirit prodded him into seeing the truth, gave him a new name and filled him with the power to preach the gospel with passion. And through the Apostle Paul many churches were established in spite of persecution. The gospel spread like wildfire. Today, the wildfire of the Holy One continues to burn. Churches are still alive in spite of what some may think; in spite of seeing decline in membership. The Church of Jesus Christ lives on and continues to be empowered and equipped for preaching the gospel and for continuing the mission of Christ.

The Church will not die until Jesus Christ returns. The Church may change, it may look entirely different from how we know it today, but it is Christ's Church and we are his body. The wildfire of the Holy Spirit lives and moves and has its Being in us.

Over 2,000 years ago the wildfire of the Holy Spirit began a powerful spark that spread throughout the ages and thanks be to God, we get to experience that wildfire today as it blows through us, calling us to rise up and boldly tell the same old wonderful story of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is through us, in this generation, that the Holy Spirit is still at work.

We can't help but do our part. Let's do it with passion and great joy! Come Holy Spirit. Revive us, renew us, burn off the old and grow your Word anew with in our hearts.

Amen.

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