

A Divine Mystery

Acts 2:1-18

Good Morning Church Family, both those of you here in person and those who are joining us online. Today is Pentecost, the day the church celebrates the arrival of the Holy Spirit to the first century followers of Jesus, and the day we celebrate the assurance that God sent the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us until our Lord Jesus returns.

Taylor and I have had virtually the same bedtime routine for our kids since Junia was just a few months old. Most parents will tell you the importance of a consistent, comforting bedtime routine for kids to ensure that magical transition from awake to asleep for little ones. We serve the kids a small snack, brush their teeth, put on their pajamas, read a book together, sing “their special song” together, and then lights out. Their special song is The Doxology. We’ve literally sung it thousands of times to our kids. It was about a year ago, I think, after we had sung the song, Junia piped up, “The Holy Ghost!? Like a real Ghost!? Why is that in the song!?” Ah, a good question. I explained that Holy Ghost is sort of a old fashioned term for the Holy Spirit; it’s not actually a ghost. “Is the Holy Spirit kind of a ghost?” No, it’s just you that you can’t see it, it’s just sort of all around us, it’s kind of...magical? “Oh like a ghost.” Mmmm. I see what you’re saying here.

The moment in the Biblical Narrative when the believers meet the Holy Spirit is a wild story- truthfully, it feels a bit scary and mysterious. In the account from Acts that Ed read for us this morning, the believers are all gathered together in one place. The beginning of the book of Acts, just one chapter before, the author of the book recounts that Jesus had told his followers to not leave Jerusalem, but to stay together and “wait for the promise of the Father” and that they would “be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” So, that’s what the believers are doing at the start of our text for this morning, staying together and waiting. I imagine the air thick with anticipation, of wondering and anxiously dithering. Will today be the day? How will we know? Could we have missed it? This is a much lower stakes example, but has anyone here ever waited for a phone call about a job they really wanted? “We’ll let you know by the end of the week.”, so you spend all day checking your phone, making sure the ringer is on, will it be today? How long am I going to have to wait? I just want to know!” I imagine the believers experiencing that feeling, but magnified.

Verse two days, “And suddenly from heaven there came the sound like the rush of the violent wind,” You know that moment just before a thunderstorm hits when the air around you changes, everything darkens, the wind shifts and picks up, and you can feel the storm approaching in your body, it’s eerie and little frightening, now imagine that feeling in the room with you, “filling the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit (so this is the baptism that Jesus was referring to,

this filling) and gave them the ability to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability.”

It's a wild account, a story of tense waiting, of dramatic change, of seemingly inexplicable manifestation of the power of God in a room of people. And it's hard to talk about the Holy Spirit, with kids or with adults, because it feels abstract, hard to understand, mysterious even. What are we to do with this third person of the trinity? This main character in the Pentecost story? How do we make sense of the nature of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives?

One of the things that I learned in my preaching course is that when, in a sermon, you're unpacking some challenging concepts or jumping around a lot to different ideas, you should use a unifying image or a metaphor to make the sermon message more accessible. We do this sort of thing all the time in life, when my kids ask me the definition of a word, I'll say, "oh it's like this, or it's similar to this thing." So, this morning, as we ask these questions about the Holy Spirit together, I'll be borrowing the same image that our text uses- the Holy Spirit is like fire.

Like a fire, the Holy Spirit illuminates. Jesus knew that his followers, this fledgeling church, would need someone to show them a way forward, a path to walk in, and that is one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit to speak life, and to show us a way through darkness. Taylor is one of those delightfully crazy people who goes winter running. With the exception of the coldest nights of the year, Taylor straps on his shoe spikes, bundles up and heads out to crunch across the snow. This year, I bought him a headlamp,

thinking it might be useful. Taylor reported that he was amazed at the difference it made- he could run faster, more confidently now that he could see better where he was going. He didn't realize how tricky it was to run before he had the headlamp. The same work is done by the Spirit, like a candle in the darkness, the Spirit shows us the way, offers us comfort, reminds us that we can keep going, keep running the path of Jesus because the way is lit with life-giving light.

Like a fire, the Holy Spirit refines us. Fire is used for all sorts of purposes in metal working- to soften the metal to bend it into a new shape, to heat away all the impurities to ensure that what is left is pure and true. 1 Peter 1:3-7 says, “**3** Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **4** and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, **5** who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. **6** In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. **7** These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. “ The Holy Spirit carries us through suffering, allowing our faith to be refined. Another image to consider is that the Spirit is like a controlled burn, an intentionally set fire to keep the forest or land healthy and balanced, a small fire for our spiritual health that keeps a destructive fire moving though.

Like a fire, the Holy Spirit empowers us. When Val and I were talking through a plan for this Pentecost service, we talked about how the ability to make and manage fire was such a revelation for early civilization. To be able to create and sustain a fire meant that you could cook food, stay warm, have light to see with, and the security that comes all along with those things. It's empowering and sustaining to have your own fire. In my very modern context, I think about how frustrating it is when the power goes out for an extended period of time, "I can't do anything! I can't cook or keep the house warm or cool", I'm cut off from the power of electricity to do what I need and want to do. We can flip that analogy around and see how the Holy Spirit empowers us to do the things that we need and want to do the kingdom of God. "Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language.

Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' " that's verses 6-12 of Acts 2. The Holy Spirit empowers us, the Church, to offer the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world,

And like a fire, the Holy Spirit is uncontrollable. It is wild, filling a room like a mighty wind. Resting flames over the head of those on the day of Pentecost. I think of the

massive forest fires and bushfires like the fires that took place in the Amazon or Australia in recent memories. Those fires were so powerful, so out of control that they created their own weather systems, changing the atmospheric conditions. So too is the Holy Spirit, things changed on the first Pentecost when that uncontrollable Spirit of God came to the believers, and it came to us. The Holy Spirit changes the atmosphere, the weather conditions around us. As the saying goes "You Can't Control the Weather ", nor can we control the Spirit.

Yet, we try to control the Spirit, to decide when to heed its voice and when to ignore it. I've shared this story before, at our church in Manitoba, the wife of the pastor couple at our church, Marilyn, had the gift of speaking in tongues. I had never been a part of a church where this was a practice, and I remember feeling very uncertain, and nervous the first time it happened. It seemed too different, too outside the norms of how I experienced church, but the more it happened the more normal it became. We saw the interpretation bring words of life and encouragement to a congregation that had an inordinate amount of people struggling, given its small size. I learned that when Marilyn first had this feeling, these words bubbling up inside her, she held back, not knowing what would happen. She shared this with her fellow Elders, who were just as nervous and bewildered as she was, but they thought, "Well, it's certainly not the right choice to hold these words from God back." Marilyn, and really the whole church, made the choice to yield control of the Holy Spirit and it brought such life to that congregation.

So, how can we welcome or learn to make room for this illuminating, refining,

empowering and uncontrollable spirit in our lives? I wish there was like a five step process for this, because I really love a clear answer and path to follow, but that's not the case here. It's like building and nurturing a fire, it takes practice, patience, and learning more about the fire performed in your particular fireplace or fire pit, how much air to let in, how much shelter to provide based on the weather. There are couple of words of guidance from scripture and our tradition that I will share.

First, as followers of Jesus, we can trust that we have the Holy Spirit in us, dwelling within us and guiding us into the way of life. The faith tradition that grew up really ingrained in me that my own ideas, thoughts, and definitely feelings were not to be trusted- that anything that came up internally was suspect. Because, as the Bible said, "The Heart is wicked and deceitful above all things, who can know it?"

Yet, the same scriptures said "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?", that's 1 Corinthians 3:16. Because of the Holy Spirit dwelling in both our souls and bodies, we can trust this inner wisdom that has been gifted to us. When our bodies ask for rest, or for a challenge, ask to grieve or to dance, to preach the word or to receive the word, we can learn to hear the voice of God speaking life to us and for us.

Now, that being said, we are also Anabaptists who hold to the Priesthood of All Believers. Anabaptists who are called to discern together the direction in which the Holy Spirit is leading us. When I look back on my own calling into Pastoral ministry, the call

didn't begin for me, internally. It was was the voice of my church, of my friends and mentors, and the voices of the congregations that I candidate with that said, "we see the gifts you have and we affirm you in this role" and as I went through that process, I began to see and feel those things in myself.

Sometimes the voice of the Holy Spirit comes as an inner knowing in our own mind, body and heart, and sometimes the voice of the Spirit comes from a friend, a family member, a sibling in Christ. Like kindling a fire, we learn to listen, observe and practice the skill of listening and acting according to the will of the Spirit in our lives. Each fire is as unique as each of us.

So, Siblings in Christ, the Holy Spirit is a divine mystery. Like a fire, it warms, illuminates and refines. Like a fire, it was wild, unpredictable and goes wherever it chooses. And Christ invites up to be swept up in it, just like those men and women on that first Pentecost.

Amen.