

“What the Wind Carries”
Sermon from Acts 2:1-18
Given Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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When the day of Pentecost arrived, they all met in one room. Suddenly they heard what sounded like a violent, rushing wind from heaven; the noise filled the entire house in which they were sitting. Something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each one. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as she enabled them.

Now there were devout people living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled. But they were bewildered to hear their native languages being spoken. They were amazed and astonished: “Surely all of these people speaking are Galileans! How does it happen that each of us hears these words in our native tongue? We are Parthians, Medes and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya around Cyrene, as well as visitors from Rome – all Jews, or converts to Judaism – Cretans and Arabs, too; we hear them preaching, each in our own language, about the marvels of God!”

All were amazed and disturbed. They asked each other, “What does this mean?” But others said mockingly, “They’ve drunk too much new wine.”

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven and addressed the crowd: “Women and men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem! Listen to what I have to say! These people are not drunk as you think – it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! No, it’s what Joel the prophet spoke of:

'In the days to come – it is our God who speaks – I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind. Your daughters and sons will prophesy. Your young people will see visions, and your elders will dream dreams. On all my people, both women and men, I will pour out my Spirit, and they will prophesy.'

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I lit a candle as I sat down to write this sermon.

I lit a candle because flames have always helped to center me. I find the warmth that emanates from a candle soothing, the flickering of the flame entrancing, and calming.

I want to think that somewhere in my subconscious, I lit a candle because long ago, flames appeared in a bush near the path where Moses was walking, and the flames raged in the bush but they did not consume it, and when Moses drew near, he heard the voice of God, and God told him, through those flames, “I have heard the cries of my people, and I have come to rescue them.” Maybe I lit a candle to remind myself of that hearing, rescuing God.

It's possible that also from that deep and unacknowledged place, I lit a candle because after Jesus was crucified, somehow, he appeared again to his friends, on the beach, and called them to gather around a campfire, and when they came close he invited them to sit and

share a meal with him. Maybe I lit a candle to remind myself of that inviting, nourishing God.

It might be true, on some level, to say I lit a candle because that's what we do on Christmas Eve, when we are remembering the holiest of all mysteries, how God entered into this world, these streets, these bodies. Or that I lit a candle because that's what we do at vigils, when we don't have words, and we're hoping the dancing flames will speak for us the respect, the honor, the mourning, we want to offer.

I was going to say I lit a candle because today is Pentecost, because I was settling in to write a sermon for Pentecost, a sermon about the coming of God's Spirit, and God's Spirit has often been imagined as a flame, like it is in this story. Maybe some of you lit a candle this morning, before we began. Maybe you could go and light one now.

I lit a candle and watched it burn. And even though my life and our faith offers so many ways that flame is sacred, all I could think about was the question posed at our Bible Study on Friday after we read this scripture: Someone asked, "Is there a connection between the fires of the Holy Spirit and the fires that burn in protest now?"

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We like to reference the spirit as a still, small voice. Commentator Jana Childress remembers growing up in a church where she was taught, “The Holy Spirit is a gentleman – he never forces his way in, and only goes where he is invited.” There are Biblical references that hint at the subtlety of the Spirit. And then there’s Pentecost.

Then there’s Pentecost, where nothing is gentle or subtle, Pentecost, where the followers of Jesus were gathered together in one room, and a violent, rushing wind came. It unsettled them, in every imaginable way. It surrounded them. It lit a fire in each of them. The wind and fire – the movement that began to take hold of them – brought them from their place as closed up in that room and out into the street, and when people criticized, they said, “No. We will not let you explain this movement away so easily; we will not let you condemn what you perceive as our bad behavior so that you can ignore it. Something is happening here and it demands your attention.”

Friends, something is happening in our world, and it demands our attention. It is not new. It is only urgent in the same way it has always been urgent, which is to say, it is heartbreakingly, devastatingly normalized now. But we cannot turn away from the

ways white violence and fear and power endangers, claims, and destroys the lives of people of color, the ways that crisis is literally burning in our streets. We don't need to repeat the headlines here, to recount the violences, to replay them. You know they are real. You can recite them in your own head.

We need to talk about the fire this reality will light in us. Rachel Cargle – a black public intellectual and activist, in a talk last night called “Revolution Now,” asked, “How will you show up during this time in history? Not just as an ally, but as an accomplice to upend the systems that are killing us all?” I wanted to share this bit of her talk: for people who are paying attention to the injustices in our country and find themselves overwhelmed with grief or fear or anger or helplessness, she gave this equation:

Your part = Critical Knowledge + Radical Empathy + Intentional Action

Critical Knowledge, she said, is taking the time to seek out and pull from credible sources. It's a commitment to not let marginalized people only be spoken for, particularly by white politicians or white academics or white journalists. Seek out the voices of marginalized people, specifically, and listen to them.

Radical Empathy, she said, is moving past the stage of saying, “I feel you,” moving past having the ability to understand, and moving towards holding ourselves accountable for the ways we play into the pain of others; for white people, specifically, how the other side of our privilege is persecution for people of color.

And Intentional Action, she said, is asking: What can I do right now to make a difference with my access and my ability? How can I hold my community accountable for doing the same – for preserving all life, for protecting all people, for using its power for the good of all, with special attention to those whom these systems have historically – and continually – worked against?

Maybe one way we begin developing our critical knowledge and our radical empathy, one way we determine which intentional actions might be the first and best to take, is by letting the story of Pentecost, and the words from the prophet Joel, guide us: maybe we ask – by listening to stories on the national news or stories from our community or stories around our dinner tables – we ask each other: What visions do you see? What dreams fill your head, and your heart? We ask our people of every age and every gender and every experience, we ask not to judge but to learn, not to dismiss but to

discover. We ask because we know – we know from Scripture and we know because we are human – that visions and dreams are not the exclusive property of the powerful, or even of those we’ve historically called prophets, but they belong to us all. And the healing that our world needs right now is to be found in those whose dreams and visions have not been nurtured and nourished, have not yet found their full realization. And when we listen to the dreams and visions of all people, we might find remarkable echoes between them: people dream, Cargle says, of being able to stay alive and to be well. To maneuver without fear or frustration. People dream of liberation. Of community value. Of black joy, black ease, black lives mattering.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a poem that is, in some ways, a creation-to-Pentecost story, a call to each of us to take our place in the difficult and beautiful work of being alive at this time. He writes:

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:*

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.*

Pentecost comes fiercely and leaves us with more questions than answers. These are the questions I hear in it – maybe you have others: I hear, What lights up your heart? What does your passion burn for? What is the particular language that is yours, that if you opened your mouth to let loose, others might hear and understand it, too? Is it possible to not be afraid of those flames, but to fan them – the flames of anger at injustice; the flames of courage for action that tears down oppressive systems from the inside out; the flames of resistance against all the would deny the full humanity of any kindred; the flames of hope for a world in which all people might know safety, and ease, and flourishing, and joy?

Pentecost brings the good news of God's Spirit come to rest on all people, but that's only the very beginning – it also brings the challenge to each of us to kindle within our own hearts, our own lives, flames with big enough shadows for God to move in.

And if big flames feel like more than you can contain at this time, you can light a small candle, and go to the corner of 2nd and Adams, at the McMinnville Public Library. There, someone has erected a memorial shrine for all who have experienced the violence and injustice we're speaking about today. There, you can leave a flower, or a card, or sing a song, or read a lament, or repent of the violence in your own heart, or commit to a new way, or say a prayer for the courage to fan those flames within your own life that will burn out all that needs to go and create the space for God's Spirit to move.