

Fire in the Eyes

Shepherd's Grace Church

May 19, 2013

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

(Acts 2: 1-21)

As we gather this morning I am reminded of our dress! We are wearing red. I will say more about that in a few minutes but I am also reminded that we are a bit more casual in our attire today. We, many of us are wearing jeans and boots, open collar shirts and hats. We are gathering to remember the cowboys, to step back in time just a bit and listen to the music of our recent ancestors, to set aside the hustle and bustle of our busy lives and find a calmer, more peaceful time when people gathered on Sunday morning to celebrate worship as a way of giving thanks for the grace of God that has gotten them through another busy week!

Some who are gathered with us this morning are still cowboys. Some still work the land as farmers and others work cattle but for the most part we gather as those who would remember men and women who survived the taming of this land by the sweat of their brow and the callous of their hand! Most of us know of the difficulty of their lives only by the stories we read and the music we hear. We romanticize their lives and long for the peace they seemed to enjoy.

The reality however is that they knew no peace! These men and women who tamed our wilderness struggled for their daily existence in the world they lived in as they faced threats of attack from enemies, weather, crop failure and many other kinds of devastation that they were forced to deal with on a daily basis. Just as Jesus foretold in Matthew 24 there were wars and rumors of war, earthquakes and floods, famine and many other signs of pestilence! The only peace that could be found was as they turned to the Lord in worship!

Imagine with me for just a moment what some of the early settlers would have seen as they first came to the prairies that are settled just beyond our view this morning! As they crossed the tall grass and rolling fields that we call the flint hills they would have looked westward and seen the seemingly endless stretch of unfettered grasslands. These vast lands would have laid out before them like an ocean just waiting for them to cross. The obstacle of space would not have been the only difficulty they encountered. As they traveled late into the evening they would have seen lightening storms with fire that came down from the sky to touch the earth. They would have seen great prairie fires at about this time of year as the flint hills were set on fire from mother nature herself! Their days would have been filled with great anxiety as they wondered whether there was any end to the trial they were forced to suffer! The only peace they would find was when they came together to encourage one another and worship a God whom they trusted with their very lives! These are the ones we come to remember and celebrate this morning. These are the ones whom we gather to join on this day of Pentecost!

Just like those early settlers, I was awakened this morning by a flash of lightening and a loud clap of thunder! As I lay there listening to the rain begin to fall my first thought was about worship this morning and the tailgate party following. I thought of all the preparation and all the people who had put countless hours into making both of these events possible. My inclination was to think about how unfair it was that the weather should be so unfavorable for our plans for the day! My first prayers today were not of gratitude, but of grumbling! I was upset that God should allow such inclement weather to interfere with our plans and all the hard work so many people had put into making today possible!

I had other plans for today! I had a different vision about what the day should look like and I wanted God to know that I wasn't very happy! Just as I started my rant, I stopped! I took a deep breath and remembered a line that I am sure many of you have heard also; "If you want to hear God laugh, tell Him about your plans!" In that moment I realized my selfishness! I realized my limited perspective! I

realized my unwitting and unknowing rambling as the sheer folly of someone incapable of understanding the fullness of God's plan. At that moment I bowed my head and started over again!

I am sure that those cowboys whom we celebrate this day often had similar feelings to mine. I am sure they often grumbled and complained to God about how frustrated they were with the difficult and different circumstances they were facing, but I am confident that they also came to worship on Sunday to give thanks for God's grace and love in seeing them through another week! So I bowed my head to try again! This time, with a new attitude of gratitude the Lord gave me a different way to understand the events of this day!

As I prayed and listened to the rain fall, the thunder clap and the lightening crack I was reminded of how desperately we all need the rain. We have been experiencing shortfalls here for months. I was reminded of how the rain and cooler temperatures make it more affordable for many people who struggle to pay excessive heating bills. Another day of respite from the heat just might make a huge difference in their lives. I was reminded of how, even in those days of the settlers crossing our beautiful state, the rain provided water and relief for weary travelers! I was reminded of one other thing as well.

Storms have been a very powerful part of my life. One of my earliest memories is of a powerful tornado that struck my hometown of El Dorado in 1958. I don't remember much of the detail of the storm but I remember my mother being very cautious and protective, making sure that my brother and I were safe and sound in a secure place. I remember her having a radio and I remember the noise of the sirens. I remember after the storm the sense of relief she seemed to experience as she recognized that our house had been spared any damage. Later in my life I learned that others had not been nearly so fortunate. There was significant damage to the refinery and one of the elementary schools was lost. Many homes were destroyed and lives were lost. I heard stories of how the town pulled together to rebuild and restore property to its former status and about how we came together as a community because of the storm.

When I was 7 I was awakened by the baby-sitter at around midnight one night. My parents were away and he smelled smoke downstairs. He rushed me out of the house while he got my two younger brothers and carried them in his arms. From the safety of our neighbor's home we watched as our home was engulfed with flames and most of our worldly possessions were destroyed. I remember watching after the fire as my father and mother began the long process of clean-up and recovery. What I remember more than the fire was the new found sense of commitment I found in my parents. They seemed to grow closer together as they struggled through the adversity of the situation! Our family grew closer together in the face of our difficulties as well and it wasn't long after that that I asked my father to begin taking me to church.

In 1974 I was working at Montgomery Ward in the mall as a part time job while I attended Emporia State University. In May of that year a tornado ripped through Emporia and destroyed the store I was working in. I had applied for a job at JCPenney but had not been accepted. On Monday after the tornado on Friday the store manager at Penney called and asked me to come to work for them. I worked there for the next 23 years. The storm was devastating . It took the lives of 6 people and destroyed millions of dollars of property but it changed my life in a much different way!

In 1987 I was working at the JCPenney store in Sikes Shopping Center in Wichita Falls Texas. One evening as we were preparing to close the store the tornado sirens sounded and we were instructed to activate emergency procedures. We ushered all our customers and any others in the mall into our stairwell area in the center of the store. An f-5 tornado ripped through the city. The entire shopping center was destroyed and the only thing left standing was that reinforced stairwell. My store manager lost his home, several of our employees lost possessions and many people lost their lives. JCPenney made the decision to rebuild and for the next year I worked in the community with our rebuilding project as well as other efforts to remind the community that we were still there. I made several lifelong friends and learned a great deal about some of the gifts God had given to me!

In 2007, Rochelle and I were preparing to drive to Arkansas City for an interview with two churches here. We woke to discover that the night before a tornado had wiped the community of Greensburg, KS off the map. During the day of interview our hearts and thoughts were of that community and the work that they would need to do to even begin to rebuild. We prayed with the interview committee and at some point in that interview I was invited to be a new pastor in Arkansas City! Storms have played a big part in my life!

Even as we look at the clouds rolling in on us today we can all think back to the way storms have affected our lives. We have all suffered some storms. Some of us the storms of nature, but all of us the storms of life. We have experienced the loss of loved ones, the devastation of divorce, the difficulty of loosing a job and the trauma of abuse. We have experienced storms in our lives! God reminded me this morning that without the storms there could be no sunshine. If we didn't experience the clouds we would not know the beauty of the rainbow. If it were not for the rush of a mighty wind, we could not experience the birth of the church!

Today is Pentecost Sunday. Today we celebrate the birth of God's church on earth. We experience this birth like any other birth. There is a storm of noise and the rushing forth of new life. That new life this morning is revealed to us through the divided tongues of fire. These tongues offer an opportunity to share our birth announcement with others as the Spirit gives the ability. We wear red today to symbolize the announcement of the Church's birth. The red we wear on the outside is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual fire that burns in our hearts. The church is not born in the world, it is born in God's giving to each of us His Holy Spirit!

The Hebrew word for Spirit is Ruach. This is the same word as for wind. Ruach, God's spirit comes forth like the rush of a mighty wind. This is the same wind that hovered above the face of the deep at the moment of creation. It is the same wind that rushed forth from God's mouth when He said, let there be light! It is the same wind that rushed from God's mouth as he breathed into a lifeless lump of clay and created in us the very Image of God! This Ruach, this wind blows life into believers and gives to each the ability to bring a new sense of possibility into the world! This wind is the same wind that scattered God's people in Genesis 11 as God destroyed the tower at Babel. It is the same wind that brings God's people together again as was foretold in Isaiah 43 verses 6 and 7. God said from the North and from the south I will call them and from the east and the west I will gather my people for I have paid a price for them. They are precious in my sight and I love them! (Is. 43: 4) Today is the day of Pentecost, It is the birth of God's church in the world, but more than that, it is the gift of God's life in the world!

This birth, this life is not an accident! It does not happen by chance! God has planned it carefully and has given instruction about it from 1500 years before the birth of Christ! What did God need for the birth to be accomplished? He needed willing people right? He needed believers! On the day of Pentecost all the believers were gathered in one place. Why? Why would God's believers be in one place? What possible reason could they have for being there? Look at Leviticus 23: 15 and forward. God commands...that's a bit more than a suggestion! God commands that 50 days after the "Festival of First Fruits" the people gather at the temple and worship bringing an offering from the wheat harvest! God gathers his people at Pentecost, the celebration of 50 days to remind them that they have weathered the storms of spring, that they have overcome adversity and that they should be thankful!

The people are gathered in one place on one specific day just as it says in the scripture because on the day of Pentecost that is where God has commanded them to be! All the other people, the people of the diaspora, the people who had been scattered at the time of Babel (We know it is those scattered from Babel because of the places they came from. Many of those listed had not even been nations in existence at the time of Acts but had ceased to be nations long ago!) God has called them all back from every nation under heaven so they might experience in their own native language the deeds of God's great power! God shares this power with His Ruach, His mighty wind and that wind gathers the people so they can hear the message!

They are bewildered and amazed. Just as the early settlers are bewildered and amazed as they look across the Flint Hills and see the fires blazing in the springtime grass, the gathered crowds are bewildered and amazed. God's great and powerful deeds of power as the disciples speak in tongues other than their own, are no more a powerful reminder than the fires God creates in the Flint Hills or the storms that woke me this morning and reminded me of God's great and powerful deeds still at work in this world.

Some do not believe in God's power. They sneer and jeer at the disciples. In today's world there are still some who do not believe! They cannot recognize the gift of life the church gives to the world. Instead they suggest that our prayers, our witness, our tradition, our commands that have been given by God are not worthy of their attention. They have not been able to explain how creation came into being, or how life began in the world but they just know that it must be something other than the wind of God! They are willing to accept that it could be by random chance and yet when they look at the world they wake up to in the morning they see a symmetry, a sense of purpose and an intelligence evidenced in their every move but that must be because of some freakish cosmic accident.

Today we wake to storms that shake the very foundations of the world and many who drive by our parking lot this morning will scoff and jeer and increase the noise of their car to distract us, but today we know God has planned for us to be here. We are gathered in this place because we have been rehearsing being here since the command given by God. Today we experience the violence of the storms and we welcome them as a reminder that God uses the storms of our lives to remind us of the purpose for which our lives are intended.

We are the ones who will prophesy. We are sons and daughters of God and His Holy Spirit is poured out on us so that we can see visions and dream dreams. We are the ones who can see the possibilities for ministry that exist in our community. We are the ones who can believe there will come a day when the hungry are fed, the homeless are sheltered, the naked are clothed, the sick and the imprisoned are visited and the abused are able to step out of their dreadful situations into places and surrounded by people who will honor their lives as a gift from God! These are but some of the visions we see.

We are the ones who dream dreams of people who believe differently than we do coming together with us to discuss their beliefs as we discuss ours without calling names or criticizing the others opinion! These dreams come from the storms of our lives and we are the ones who wake up to the crack of thunder and the sound of a rushing wind. We are the ones who are filled with the wind of the Holy Spirit, the very breath of God that burns brightly in our hearts and is symbolized by the clothing we wear this morning!

Today, as the thunder cracks and the lightning flashes, we are the church. Today is our birth! It is noisy and messy and often misunderstood but there is "Fire in our eyes" as the inward sign of our love for God and Neighbor burns into a full flame of passion. This passion is the same passion experienced by Peter. Peter, the one who denied Christ has been born again into a new life, a life of faith. He is a sinner saved by God's grace and even from his sin he steps forward to remind us that God can and will use whatever is available to make his word known. Today we, the Church, see in Peter's example and direction that God calls us to. We are to be witness in the world. We are not just Born in the world but we bring to the world and that is the fire we display today. This is Pentecost! Let the wind blow where it will!
Amen!

