

“WHERE’S THE FIRE?”
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Acts 2:1-21

One day a pastor was riding to a cemetery in the car with the funeral director. They were leading the procession to the committal service. As they drove along, the funeral director kept up a running conversation. That’s been my experience with funeral directors as well – they all have the gift of gab! At any rate, on this particular day the funeral director was pointing out the trees that surrounded the cemetery. They were all shaped the same, not because they were all the same type of trees; no, but because they had all been shaped by the wind. Over time, he said, trees that have to stand out in the open become shaped by the force and direction of the wind. (On-line, “Sermons for Pentecost,” David R. Cartwright)

Today, on Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate something else that was shaped by the force of wind – and that is the church of Jesus Christ, formed on that day so long ago by the wind of the Holy Spirit. You heard the lesson – it’s a powerful, powerful story. People had gathered from places far and wide in Jerusalem, and all of a sudden from heaven came the sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire place where they were gathered. Then divided tongues, like flames of fire, appeared, and the Spirit filled them and they began to speak in all different languages. It was an amazing spectacle – but what was even more amazing is that in the midst of all of those languages being spoken at the same time – each person there was able to understand the word from the Lord! And they were amazed by that! “How is it,” they asked, “that in the midst of all that noisy chatter, we can understand in our own language?”

It was such a startling spectacle, that others who saw it wondered if these people might be drunk! It was wild and intense and they were so filled with the Spirit, it looked a little suspicious. But Peter immediately stood up and explained what was going on, because it had been prophesied – that the day would come when God’s Spirit would descend and fill the people, and the world would be set on fire for Jesus Christ – and that was exactly what happened.

So powerful was this experience of the Holy Spirit that the scripture says that over 3000 people that day professed Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and thus, the church of Jesus Christ was born. It was an incredible day, and an incredible experience.

And what happened that day still touches us this day!

A friend of mine from Annual Conference posted something on Facebook the other day about Pentecost, and it was so wonderful I knew I had to tell you about it. He said this:

“It looks like fire. That’s what somebody said about the Spirit doing a new thing. The people didn’t set out to be new. They gathered at the same old time, same old place with the same old words. Just like us . . .

Jesus told them something was going to happen. A Friend was coming. Power. They never imagined He would be like this. We can’t fully imagine the partnership ride with God. That’s why they call it faith.

The fire connects people. People spoke to each other on that day. They listened to each other. Despite having long hard histories together. No defensiveness. They told each other God stories that day. It looked like fire!

It looks like fire still (he says). Burning and hot. Red and yellow. Melting boundaries. Searing selfishness. Refining our religion. Pyro-spirituality. It’s true – the only church that illuminates is a burning one!” (Facebook post, 6/6/14, Demetrio Beach)

The church that was born on Pentecost Day was a burning one! Lives were on fire with the love of Jesus Christ! Everyone looking on wanted to know what they knew, wanted to have what they had. And so they, as my friend said, told each other God stories – and the people of God whose hearts have been touched by the fire of God’s Holy Spirit have been telling God stories ever since - from that day to this. And because they have, day by day, people have been drawn to Jesus Christ.

So on this Pentecost Sunday, my friends, I want to celebrate our collective birthday by telling you a few God stories.

The first is the story of a young woman who, one day, had the opportunity to speak to a group in her church about her experience of faith. She had grown up in that church, and was baptized right at that very same baptismal font that was still there in her adulthood. She says that her father used to like to tell her about the day she was baptized – about the beautiful dress she wore, the hymns that were sung, what the pastor said in his sermon. And he would always end the story with, “Oh sweetheart, the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!”

Then, she said, as a child she would go to worship on Sunday with her parents and wonder, “Well, where is the Holy Spirit now?” She would look at the organ pipes, at the rafters in the ceiling, at the stained glass windows, and she would wonder, “Is that the Holy Spirit in this church?”

After she told them that, she got quiet and reminded the group that both of her parents had died of cancer in the same week, and how terrible it was. On Wednesday of that awful week, she was driving home from visiting her parents in the hospital and was passing by the church and felt an intense need to pray, so she stopped, went into the church and sat down in one of the back pews and began to pray. She says the church was dark, and in the shadows she prayed and prayed and poured out her grief and sadness to God, and cried from the bottom of her heart.

A member of the church was in the kitchen preparing a meal for a church meeting, and she saw her praying and knew what was happening in her life. She took off her apron, came and sat beside her in the pew, held her hand and prayed with her. It was then, this young woman said, that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church. (Ibid)

The flame of faith burned in that wonderful woman who shared her God story simply by being there, holding a hand, saying a prayer, crying with one who hurt. It wasn't a flaming inferno, it was a warm fire – the fire of God's love – burning brightly – and it made all the difference in the world to one young woman.

The second God story might just make you cry a little – it did me. The other day at Annual Conference they were announcing scholarship awards, and lo and behold, one of the awards went to our very own Carlos Reyes. Carlos wasn't able to be at conference because he's taking a class in Chicago this week, but the man who is serving as his mentor, the Rev. Bo Gordy-Stith read something to the conference that Carlos had written. It was, as you might expect, absolutely wonderful, but what moved me to tears, and I know would have moved you all as well, was the way he talked about our church. He said openly that it was his experience here at Elkton United Methodist Church that changed his life, and brought him to full faith in Jesus Christ – so full that he is committing his life to his service. What he was saying is that we shared our God stories with him, we shared the flames of our faith, and a spark was kindled in him that has become a consuming fire – and I have no doubt that thousands of people will be led to Christ through His ministry.

The third God story I want to share is unfolding right in front of us today. It's the coming to faith of a group of eight young people – our confirmation class – Dylan, Luke, Ben, Kyle, Damien, Kristina, Bailey and Carly. These dear young people are going to stand before this church today to claim the name of Christian for themselves. They're here in large part because of the faithful witness of a burning church, and burning witnesses sharing their "God stories", like many of you. How do I know that? Well, we asked them. Take a look at this video clip:

Video clip of the confirmands.

Fathers, mothers, grandparents, friends-in-faith, teachers sharing their God stories, and as they did the Holy Spirit touched these young lives in significant and life-changing ways – so much so that they are doing something extraordinary today. When so many of their contemporaries don't even go to church, let alone join – they are standing in front of all of you to make a commitment to Jesus Christ. They do it, in large part, because the very same Holy Spirit at work on the first Day of Pentecost has been at work in these days and you have shared your faith and embodied Christ's love for them.

Oh my friends, the fire of Pentecost still burns brightly today. God's Holy Spirit has touched all of us in so many ways, and will continue to do so. So today, on this our birthday, I want to invite you to do two things. The first one is this: thank those who have shared their God stories with you. You know who they are. You know the ones who have shared their stories, brought you to church, prayed for you, been an example on how to be a faithful Christian, told you about how God has carried them everything in their life. Thank those who have shared their God stories with you and helped to make you the Christian that you are.

Did any of you happen to see a television show on last week about Oprah Winfrey's "Legends Ball"? Let me tell you a little about it, because it did, in effect, what I just asked you to do. It was an occasion to say thank you.

Oprah hosted a weekend a while ago for women she called "legends" – African American women who blazed a path for others like her – women like Coretta Scott King, Maya Angelou, Cicely Tyson, Nancy Wilson and many others. She wanted to celebrate all that they had done with their lives, and most especially the tremendous influence they had on those who came after them – those Oprah called "young uns" – like Halle Berry and Beyonce and Janet Jackson, and Oprah herself. So she put together this incredible weekend. On Friday, there was a banquet honoring the women. On Saturday, there was a white tie ball. At both of those events, there was an opportunity for the young uns to tell the legends just how much they meant to them, and how profoundly they touched their lives. It was incredibly moving for everyone, especially for the legends to hear the "thank you's," the words of gratitude for the way their "stories" had made a difference in these young lives.

On Sunday morning, they were scheduled to have a brunch, and indeed, they all gathered on the lawn but it turned to be way more than a brunch. BeBe Winans, a gospel singer, started singing about how Jesus changed him, and then he walked out into the audience, right up to the row where the legends were sitting and started handing the microphone one after another to them. So Tina Turner sang and Gladys Knight sang and Dionne Warwick sang and Patti Labelle sang – and they didn't just sing, they sang from the bottom of their hearts! They sang every

word with passion and power, as if they meant it – because they did! They sang about Jesus – indeed, they sang their “God stories” - and before long, people were jumping to their feet, and waving their hands in praise, and crying with joy! It was a Holy Ghost experience – the Spirit swept through there in a mighty way.

Newswoman Diane Sawyer was present that day, and she said it was the most spiritual moment she had ever experienced, and she would never, ever forget it. It transformed her – her words!

Friends, tell the people who have shared their faith with you “thank you.” Let them know that their God stories have helped you have your own.

Then finally, go forth from this place to tell your story to others. It doesn't always have to be in words (although surely, sometimes it should be), but simply show your faith to those around you. You never know - it may be you that God will use to touch another life and make it whole. It may be you that God will use to turn a heart toward Jesus. It may be you – you and your God story – so go forth from this place, in the spirit of Pentecost to be God's faithful witness, and may your faith burn in such a way that you help spark the fire of faith in the life of someone else. May it be so.

Amen.