

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Acts 2:1-21

<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> '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.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit,  
and they shall prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

<sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

The fireman was telling a kindergarten class what to do in case of a fire. He said, "First, go to the door and feel the door to see if it's hot. Then," he said, "fall to your knees. Does anyone know why you ought to fall to your knees?" One of the little tykes said, "Sure, to start praying to ask God to get us out of this mess!"

The wind and fire of the Holy Spirit comes upon all who repent and seek God, and gets us out of the mess of endless sin and brokenness. Today is Pentecost Sunday and with that we celebrate the birthday of the church. Pentecost is celebrated 50 days after the resurrection of Christ and 10 days after his ascension.

We learn from the scriptures that in those days Jews from many nations gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, not Pentecost. The Feast of Weeks festival was one of three major annual feasts. It was a festival of thanksgiving for harvested crops. It happened in this setting that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the people. It was recognized during Peter's speech, beginning at verse 14, which we read this morning. Peter explained that the Spirit was given to an international audience, and so, this outpouring of the Spirit resulted in a worldwide harvest of new believers, the first converts to Christianity. This day became known as Pentecost to the Christians.

When we back up to verses three and four, we find that they speak to the fulfillment of John the Baptist's words, which can be read in Luke 3:16, words about the Holy Spirit's baptizing with fire; and of the prophet Joel's words about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which we can read about in Joel 2:28, 29. Why did Luke, who is also the author of Acts, use the description "tongues of fire" when he wrote about the coming of the Holy Spirit? Let's explore that, beginning with this story.

A few years ago, my husband, Don, and I took a motorcycle trip down the Skyline Drive in Virginia. We spent a few days riding on the winding road. All along the road we saw beautiful green plants. We stopped at overlooks to view the green mountains that seemed to go on endlessly. There were a few places however, where we noticed burnt tree trunks standing amidst young green plants. Obviously, these were areas changed by a forest fire.

It was in one way a sad sight to see; but at the same time, it was beautiful because the ground was covered with new green life. These plants never would have had the chance to grow because larger trees blocked the sun needed for them to grow from reaching them.

Not every forest fire is started by someone's negligence or by some twisted arsonist's desire to watch a huge fire burn. Most forest fires are started by lightning. These fires are not necessarily a bad thing. They actually are kind of like nature's way of cleaning things up and allowing the earth to rejuvenate an area with much needed new life.

This is the same idea behind the meaning of the "tongues of fire." Tongues symbolize speech and the communication of the gospel. Fire symbolizes God's purifying presence, which burns away the undesirable elements of our lives and sets our hearts aflame to ignite the lives of others. And, fire spreads, which symbolizes that God's presence is available to all who believe in God. Choosing to be a believer and follower of Jesus opens our hearts and souls to the beneficial fire of the Holy Spirit in us.

On the other hand, we all know that fire can be destructive. When my husband served at a church workcamp in Honduras, he observed many dead looking areas, acres, and acres of land, on the mountainsides where he was working. He found out that this land was fertile at one time. They were fields for the local farmers' crops.

The fields were on the steep mountainsides and the farmers did not have access to modern farming equipment. So, after the harvest, instead of turning over the soil in their fields, they burned their fields. After years of doing that, nothing would grow on that land because the soil was destroyed. Adding to their problems, without growing plants, there was nothing to hold the ground in place; so, when the rainy season came, the ground would just slide down the mountainside.

In our society today there is a raging fire of evil, destroying people's lives. Burning their souls with anger, hatred selfishness and greed to the point of making their spirits barren and empty, unable to cultivate love and hope. Burning the bridges connecting them to meaningful and nurturing healthy relationships. Worst of all, burning the bridge that connects them to God.

This wildfire leads to no good. In fact, it threatens to destroy the church as it consumes more and more lost souls.

We cannot let this happen. God won't let it happen. God wins in the end, that's what scripture teaches us through Christ's resurrection and through prophecy. Jesus returns!!! We don't know when and we will never be able to figure out when. That's for God to know. We should not waste our time trying to read and interpret signs that we assume are signs of the end times because we will be wrong. The only thing that is important for us to know is that Jesus will return for us, either when we die or when he returns on that last day we read about in the prophecy.

Instead, what we need to be doing is allowing the fire of the Holy Spirit to burn inside of us. We need to lean on the scriptures and the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom for discernment between Holy and evil fires. We need to allow the wind of the Holy Spirit to blow on the holy fire in us, carrying us to the places and opportunities that will allow the Spirit to change the lives of those who are caught up in the destructive fires that consume them, and separate them from the greatest love known to humankind, and throws them into eternal darkness.

Oh yes, God wins in the end, and we have the choice to join him in helping to love and serve others, to spread the fire of the Holy Spirit or, we can choose to live the alternative, and suffer the consequences of separation from God now, and for all eternity. Let the all-consuming fire of the Holy Spirit fill your heart and the wind of the Spirit blow upon you so the Spirit spreads into the lives of all we encounter every day. Amen.