

June 9, 2019
Pentecost

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FANNING THE FLAME

1. Our family visited Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons over Memorial Day weekend.
 - a. We were amazed by the astounding beauty of God's creation including geysers like Old Faithful, hot springs, fumaroles, travertine terraces, paint pots, buffalo, elk, grizzly bears, black bears and even a lone wolf.
 - b. We learned how Yellowstone Park which is about the size of the whole of Rhode Island was formed by multiple blasts from a super volcano millions of years ago.
 - i. From those fiery beginnings and even the poor nutrition of lava-based soil, lodgepole pines, sage brush and a thriving eco-system eventually evolved.
 - ii. We saw even more recent evidence of the fiery cycle of destruction, recovery, incubation and rebirth.
 - iii. Several forest fires in both parks over the last few decades have wiped out hundreds of acres of lodgepole pines and the ecosystem they supported.
 - iv. Even in the midst of all that char, new seedlings were emerging.
 - v. The park rangers explained how important these irregular but essential blazes are for the overall health of the Parks.
 1. The lodgepole pines are the heartiest variety of pines and they can eventually grow so dense that no sunlight penetrates to the greenery below them choking out any necessary variety.
 2. Periodic burns clear out the treetops and make room for new saplings and other growth to burgeon.
 - vi. Fire might destroy in the immediacy, but it makes room for the next new thing God has in mind for all of creation.
2. Our scriptures for today both record bizarre human encounters with the burning power of the Holy Spirit.
 - a. Ezekiel recounts how the Spirit of the Lord showed him a valley of dry bones to which he was commanded to prophesy.
 - b. Luke writes that all who were together in one place saw the Spirit descend upon one another like tongues of fire.
 - c. They were bewildered, astonished and perplexed.
 - i. "Divided tongues of fire appeared among the disciples and a tongue rested on each of them.
 - d. All of the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability." (Acts 2:3-4)

- i. I can only imagine the cacophony!
 - e. Amazingly, everyone present on that Day of Pentecost, was able to understand each person's native language.
 - i. The Holy Spirit interpreted God's "Happy Birthday" message.
 - 1. The prophet Joel's words were fulfilled:
 - a. "In those days, God pours out God's spirit upon all flesh, sons and daughters prophesy...and all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Acts 2:17-21)
 - f. 3,000 persons welcomed this message and were baptized that day.
 - i. Just like Megan is being baptized today.
 - ii. And the church was born.
3. I wonder what those 3,000 persons were thinking that day.
 - a. Did they realize what had happened to each of them?
 - b. Did they feel as if those individual tongues of fire were good or bad for them?
 - c. Did they embrace those fiery lights as something they could harness and use or were they frightened by them?
 - d. I bet there were some who felt as if the fire was a gift and others who felt that the fire was frightening.
 - i. In 2001, a researcher with the Gallup Organization created something which eventually became known as the Strengthsfinder.
 - 1. The online personal assessment test outlines the user's strengths.
 - 2. Clifton's research indicated that the greatest room for overall personal improvement does not come when we focus on where we are weakest, but rather where we are strongest.
 - 3. The research validates what we know to be true.
 - 4. God gifts each one of us with strengths.
 - 5. All these gifts from God can be useful.
 - 6. For some at Pentecost, that fiery experience was a balcony experience.
 - 7. But for others it was a basement experience.
 - ii. For those who found themselves embracing the fire as a strength, God worked through them to use that energy for good.
 - 1. The fire was seen as a way to light the darkness, add warmth to the area and fuel the growth they were experiencing.
 - 2. The disciples' testimony in word and deed continued to shape the early church.
 - e. We can also recognize when fire is not perceived as good, but as something to be feared.
 - i. On May 20, 2004 at 8:35pm, 15 years ago, lightning struck our roofline and the resultant fire forced us to vacate the building for more than a year.
 - ii. Our 2004 fire was destructive, but it also created a blank canvas upon which we artistically designed our next 100 years of ministry.
 - f. Everything God creates can be good or bad, depending upon how we approach it.
 - i. Fire can be destructive as we encountered in 2004 and forests out west repeatedly experience, but it can also lay the groundwork for an upgraded building or a new growth forest.
4. How do we know whether a gift is destructive or constructive?

- a. How do we discern God's plan for our welfare and not for our harm?
- b. What is the secret sauce?
 - i. We learn the recipe for the secret sauce by paying attention to the patterns of our worship life.
- c. The day of Pentecost completes the cycle that begins with Ash Wednesday and continues through Lent and Holy Week into Eastertide.
 - i. It is the cacophony of our journey from ashes to fire.
 - ii. Why is this important?
 - iii. When we are in the middle of the cacophony, it is difficult at best to maintain perspective on the whole of our life experience.
 - 1. When we are anxious or fearful or in a time of uncertainty, we forget to hold on to the precious gift God offers each one of us at all points on our respective journeys.
 - 2. Can you guess what that all important gift to which Pentecost points is?
 - a. HOPE.
 - b. Hope does not disappoint.
 - c. Hope is the secret sauce helping us discern the constructive that can come from the destructive, the new growth that follows the fire.
 - d. When we live in hope or seek to live in hope, even the darkness is as light (Psalm 121).
 - e. And even if it is hard to hope in any given moment, our spiritual practices help us live into hope.
 - f. And when we live in hope, we are most able to live into the persons God calls us to be.
 - i. We can say and sing Here I Am, Lord as we will at the conclusion of worship.
- d. We can look to the bright shining faces of our confirmands today to remind us of the power and promise of hope and living into our callings.
- e. This church – whose birthday we celebrate with the hope of Pentecost – can be a second home and family to each and every one of us.
 - i. When we allow the hope of the Holy Spirit to blow into us just as the breath of God blew life into the bones of the valley, our spirits are ignited to know, love and serve the Triune God who made us, gifts us and redeems us.
 - ii. In the midst of being bewildered, astonished, and perplexed, it is that same spirit which protects us, guides us and nurtures us into the persons God created us to be.
 - 1. Thanks be to God!