

A Sermon for DaySpring
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The Spirit of God is Upon us All
Acts 2
May 19, 2024

The Ring of Fire. It stretches from the very tip of South America and moves north up the coast of the Pacific Ocean—along the coast of Central America—to California, Oregon, Washington,—Past Canada to Alaska and across the Bering Strait, then down past Russia, Japan, and the Philippines, all the way down to Australia.

Twenty-five thousand miles in length is this Ring of Fire. More than 75% of all the volcanoes in the world can be found somewhere along this path. More than 90% of all the earthquakes in the world occur in this region—in this ring of fire.

And my guess is you don't need to tell anyone living along those 25,000 miles that they live in the Ring of Fire. Every time the ground beneath them seems to tremble, I think they know. Every time they see smoke rising from a distant mountain, I suspect they know. When you live along those 25,000 miles, it is pretty hard to forget that you live in the Ring of Fire.

But for people like you, people like me, people who live half a continent away from the Ring of Fire, it is different. I might go a day, or a week, or perhaps even a month without really giving much thought about the Ring of Fire. It's like most anything else--the further you get away from it, the easier it is to put it out of your mind. But there are moments, there are moments when we get reminded.

Our Scripture this morning reminds us of a different kind of fire and a different story. Today is Pentecost Sunday, as we have already heard and can see before us. A day of celebration for the Church. And today, all along those 25,000 miles in the Ring of Fire, there are sisters and brothers, and they, too, are reading Acts 2. And they, too, are thinking about the coming of the Spirit. And on the other side of the world, in places like Ukraine and Syria and Iran and Gaza, where the threat of fire looks very different, they, too are huddled together, reading Acts 2, and they, too are longing for the coming of the same Spirit. So, what does it mean for *us* gathered here in *this* place—in Waco, Texas, half a continent away from the Ring of Fire—what does it mean for us on this Pentecost Sunday to celebrate Pentecost? You see, we might sometimes read Acts 2 as nothing more than a history lesson—that it is just about what happened at that church in that place. But it is not about what happened then only. We read this text today in the full certainty about what is happening now, among us, in our midst.

You know the story: that small group of disciples were gathered all alone in that upper room—just waiting and wondering. They were gathered in that upper room while the city streets were packed with those celebrating Pentecost—it was one of the 3 high, holy days in the Jewish religious calendar. Everyone else in town seemed to be going on with life...and yet here they were, gathered in that upper room, praying, waiting, wondering.

“Could there be anything more for us?” Three years with Jesus—Crucifixion—Resurrection—Ascension. Could there be anything more left for them to see or do? Then the violent winds blew and something like tongues of fire started falling upon the heads of those gathered in that place.

If we had time, I could take us through all the Old Testament, in text after text, of where fire shows up. And you remember the highlights: Moses at that nearly burning bush where he encounters God. Moses and the people of God looked to the top of Mount Sinai, and they saw fire and smoke surrounding the very presence of God. When Elijah was about to be taken up into heaven, Elisha sees a chariot of fire and horses of fire. When Ezekiel attempts to describe the throne room of God, all he can say is it was like a “great cloud with brightness all around it and fire flashing forth.” The image of fire is an image of God breaking into the world—it’s a theophany—God making himself known. And here in Acts 2, we get it again. Luke’s point is not “the pyrotechnics of theophany” (L. Johnson), it is about the God who shows up, in that upper room, to a group of people who wondered what might come next for them. When they wondered if it was all over, God broke into their midst, and it changed them.

We often refer to the day of Pentecost as the day the Holy Spirit was given to the church. But you see there is a difference between “being given to” and “being filled with.” To be given something is to take possession of it, to own it, to call it yours. To be filled by something is to be taken possession by it, to be changed radically because of it. Those gathered in that room were transformed in that moment because they had been filled up by God—cup filled up and running over with the sheer presence of God. And my guess is, that’s what we all really seek on this Pentecost Sunday—for our cups to be filled and to be running over with the sheer presence of God. And on this Pentecost Sunday, the Good News is that what we long for most is still on offer—he seeks, even now, to fill us with his Spirit so that, yes, we too might live as changed people.

This rag-tag group of fishermen, tax collectors, merchants, and homemakers were transformed in that moment, and they began to tell the story of Jesus to all gathered there. The list of cities and countries stretches from modern-day Iraq and Iran across the Mediterranean to Rome and south to Egypt. The whole world seems to be there in that moment when these people are changed by the Spirit. Luke says that those gathered in that room, “all of them began to speak in other languages.”

You see Pentecost is not simply about the coming of the Spirit so we can speak a foreign language. It’s not about just the coming of the Spirit. It is the coming of the Spirit to empower us to be the people of God. It is the coming of the Spirit of God to enable us to do the work of God. It is the spirit of God that allows us to speak—to offer words in the places where the silence has grown too loud.

When Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross was writing her famous book on death and dying, part of her research involved interviewing dying patients in the hospital. She would try to go in and see how they were feeling, what were they experiencing, what were their anxious thoughts, particularly as death seemed impending. As she went from room to room in the

hospital, she began to notice a remarkable pattern. Sometimes she would go into a dying person's room and the person would seem so calm, at peace, and tranquil.

She also began to notice that often this was after the patient's room had been cleaned by a certain hospital orderly, that is when she met with those peaceful patients. One day, Dr. Ross happened to run into this orderly in the hospital corridor and she said to her, "What are you doing with my patients?" The orderly thought she was being reprimanded by the doctor, and she said, "I'm not doing anything with your patients, Doctor." "No, no," responded Dr. Ross. "It's a good thing. After you go into their rooms, they seem so at peace. Really, what are you doing with my patients?"

"I just talk to them," the orderly said. "You know, I've had two babies of my own die on my lap. But God never abandoned me. I just tell them that. I tell them that they aren't alone, that God is with them, and that they don't have to be afraid."

We live in a world filled with people whose lives are fractured; their dreams have been dashed; their hopes seem all but erased. We live in a world filled with people for whom the silence has become too loud. On this day of Pentecost, we need to be reminded that like those gathered in that upper room—we have been filled, all of us and each of us to the brim and it's running over—we have been filled with the Spirit of the Living God. And in a world of fractured lives, dashed dreams, and erased hopes. . . in a world of deafening silence, we the church are not helpless. Like those gathered on that day, we too have been empowered; we too have been enabled; we too have something to say. Like that orderly in the hospital, we simply need to make it known that God has not abandoned us, that we are not alone, that God is with us, and that we do not have to be afraid. That is the good news, that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that we are sharing and saying in a world waiting to hear..

But who will do that? Who will put those words and deeds into action? Later in the chapter, Peter gets up and begins to preach this stirring sermon about who will have the Spirit poured out upon them. You'll remember it—he says, "Your sons and daughters, they will have the spirit to speak. The old and the young alike, they will see visions of what God is doing in the world. Even those with no social status at all, the male and female slaves, upon them, God will pour out his spirit. The Spirit of God has been poured out upon us all so that we might do his work and be his people."

The great Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh's father was a pastor in the Dutch Reformed church in the Netherlands. He often said he thought he would find his way into the ministry as well. In fact, he spent a year as a missionary working in the deep mines of Belgium ministering to the miners there. He wrote in one of his letters to his father about the challenges that he faced. He said, "There may be a great fire in our hearts, yet no one ever comes to warm himself by it, and passersby see only wisps of smoke."

The people of God were not filled with the Spirit of God so that we might be mere wisps of smoke. No, we have been filled by the Spirit of God so that together we might do the work of God, even now. We have been filled by the Spirit of God so that together we might speak the word of God, even now. We have all been filled by the Spirit of God so that

together, young and old, female and male, might bear witness to the inbreaking of God in this world. Wisps of smoke will not be enough.

Perhaps on this Day of Pentecost, we might wonder; we might wonder how we read this text as more than simply a history lesson—as more than about what happened then. How do we read this text today, in the full certainty that the Spirit of Pentecost is being poured out, even now?

Oh, to be sure, it is possible to celebrate Pentecost, but one time a year, and to assume the coming of the Spirit has occurred, and we might even give our token nod of appreciation for all that that means. It is even possible to live as though we are totally unaware of all the Pentecost continues to mean. It's possible because like most anything else, the further you get away from it, the easier it is to put it out of your mind.

It is possible unless you have been around here in recent weeks and months.

In these recent days, it seems to me as though the distance between that first Pentecost and the work of the Spirit in this place, it seems as though that distance has collapsed. Yes, it's true that long ago in an upper room, a group of disciples gathered wondering if it was all over, wondering what the future may hold, wondering what it is that God would have them to do. They gathered in that upper room, and in a moment the winds blew and something like a fire touched down, and they were utterly transformed by the Spirit of the living God.

And here is what I know on this Pentecost Sunday. What I know is that on the side of a grassy hill, in a small simple church, tucked away at the end of a street named Renewal, it seems as though the winds are stirring, and it seems as though something like a fire is touching down upon us all. It seems as though we are being filled and our cups are running over, and that suddenly, the distance between the first Pentecost and this Pentecost, it does not seem so very great anymore. In fact, it seems as though the same Spirit of God is at work among us all—even now.

And for that, all we can say, is “Thanks be to God.”

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