

It's easy to get caught up in the implications of Pentecost for us and simply skip right over the confusion, noise, excitement, and yes, terror of that day. If you run an internet search of images of Pentecost, you'll find a lot of doves, a lot of flames, and a lot of really happy-looking disciples. There aren't that many pictures of faces which are shocked and in awe. There are a lot of pictures of disciples with tiny little flames above their heads. The problem with all of these images is that they lack motion. In capturing this brief moment in time, we have domesticated it. We have reduced the Spirit to small, contained, manageable flames, when that isn't what the book of Acts describes at all.

It was the day of Pentecost, a Jewish holiday. The disciples were gathered together in one place in a house. Maybe the same house where they had met with Jesus just 50 days earlier. Suddenly, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. Broken dishes, flapping curtains, overturned chairs, yelling, shouting, maybe they thought it was an earthquake. And then, with the sound of rushing wind still filling their ears, they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. This is not an event which can be captured in a photograph. This is not an event that can be memorialized in words.

Wind and Fire

This is not your regular, every day, miracle. This is God breathing new life, filling a room like the wind, leaving no space untouched by the refreshing and overwhelming power of the Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord is powerful. The Spirit of the Lord is moving. The Spirit of the Lord cannot be domesticated or tamed, or made to fit what we want it to be. The power of the Lord needs to be felt and experienced, not just described. Power, after all, is the ability to act or cause something to act. The Acts of the Apostles, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Two things can be done with power: it can be unleashed, or it can be harnessed.

The energy in ten litres of gasoline, for instance, can be released explosively by dropping a lighted match into the can. Or, it can be channelled through a car's engine and used in a controlled burn to transport the vehicle about 100km. In the first instance, the result is spectacular and immediate. The controlled burn, on the other hand, has some staying power. The Holy Spirit works both ways. At Pentecost, he exploded on the scene; His presence was like "tongues of fire". Thousands were affected by one burst of God's power. But the gift of the Holy Spirit wasn't just a one-time event. It was a lasting gift for the church intended as an energy source for the long-haul.

Imagine the terror of the disciples as these tongues of fire swept through the room. That would be a good natural instinct. Fire in a home, is never a good thing. It is full of risk and danger to both life and property. But fire is not always a bad thing. In places where its power and heat can be harnessed, we use it to heat our homes, power our vehicles, cook our food and light our way. Of course, these are all situations in which we find ourselves very much in control of the situation. How do we feel about things we're not in control of?

If I were to survey the room, I imagine that most people would agree with the statement "forest fires are bad". It's largely true. Forest fires can sweep out of control, they can endanger entire communities quickly, and they can be very difficult to put out. However, in the Boreal forests of Northern Ontario, fire is an essential part of the life cycle. Jack Pine trees, for example store their seeds in pinecones. Pinecones which only open when exposed to the extreme heat of fire. These trees need sunlight to grow. Fire takes down everything in its path and clears a way for a new seed bed and optimal growing conditions. White Pine forests benefit from slow fires in the underbrush. These trees have thick bark and long trunks. A fire which creeps along their bases benefits them by clearing the bush around them, without negatively impacting the mature trees. Fire, in creation, is a natural regeneration agent. Part of a cycle of life, death, and new life.

So what does this have to do with the Holy Spirit? In short, everything. We have a natural instinct to expect the status quo. To expect what we can control. To expect that what we want to happen is the best iteration of God's plans. The Jewish people expected the Messiah to be a fierce warrior to come as a powerful force against their oppressors. When he came in a form they weren't expecting, it became difficult for them to reconcile the two. It was unexpected, it was out of their control, and many didn't like it. This lack of control and understanding of God's work was terrifying to many, just as a bush bursting into flame, winds parting the waters of the sea.

Just as the fear and discomfort that comes with forest fires, we don't always see or understand the big picture of God's plan. The arrival of the Holy Spirit, the arrival of Jesus, in fact, was unsettling, awe-inspiring, and terrifying both to the individuals in that house, and to those who heard them speaking in all the languages that the Spirit enabled them to speak. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost opened the door to God's power in a way which cannot be contained or directed. It was that match in the gasoline, exploding on the scene and also, the slow burn of continued power. The Pentecost story from Acts speaks of the Holy Spirit's presence as God's unconstrained action toward new creation. From the ashes of fire, springs new and flourishing life. The events of Pentecost point to the fact that God's desire for redemption, new creation and salvation reign supreme, regardless of any barriers we create that stand in its way.

Regardless of the limitations and guidelines we might like to set for the Holy Spirit's action, it moves of its own accord, filling the whole earth. God intends to break open, tear down, and make new all dimensions of the church, born at Pentecost. That's not to say that God seeks to destroy all that has been built, but rather that we must remember to whom the church belongs. If we insist on being constrained within the structures that we have created for ourselves, then we risk resisting what the Spirit's unpredictable nature might be doing next.

Our faith is a movement, not a monument.

Confused, in an uproar, beside themselves, undone, blown away, thoroughly disoriented, completely uncomprehending. Is this our reaction to the Spirit's action in our midst? That's not a bad thing. It becomes problematic when we seek to deny what is happening. The disciples began speaking in other languages. Explaining the gospel to all who would listen. They didn't hunker down and wait for the storm to pass. One of the things I hear all the time is "there aren't as many people here as there used to be". Of course there isn't! Cultural Christianity doesn't exist here anymore. It's not the expected cultural behaviour to go to Church. Increasingly rare are people who go to church because their neighbours would comment if they didn't. Instead, our churches are filled with people who WANT to be here. That's an amazing thing! We come and we worship with others knowing that there is no place else that we would rather be! Just because numbers decline doesn't mean that the Spirit is not moving. This is a REALLY exciting time to be the church. Terrifying? Disorienting? Disturbing? Confusing? ABSOLUTELY! When I'm eligible to retire, 35 years from now, what will the church look like? That's a scary unknown. We have no idea what the church is going to look like even 10 years from now. Chances are though, that it's not going to look like it has in the past because the Spirit is moving, our faith is a movement, not a monument.

So, with trepidation and in awe of what the Spirit is doing, Pentecost calls the church to remember that while our faith practices are rooted in local contexts, the church is truly universal, encompassing all languages and traditions. The Spirit is moving in the universal church. The Holy Catholic Church.

Pentecost also calls the church to remember that the gift of the Holy Spirit is an ongoing gift. It pours out and fills congregations both large and small. It reminds us that change is rarely harmonious or easy but by the Spirit's power it is possible and that Jesus Christ is alive in the midst of change. Finally, Pentecost calls the church to remember that we are called together as a community to live our faith together. None can exist apart from Christ or from the rest of the body. We are called to move with the Spirit, in all its untamed, unpredictable and unrestricted movement. Placing our faith in Jesus Christ who offers salvation to all and proclaiming this Good News to all the earth.

Pentecost 2015 – Acts 2:1-21
Rev. Graham McCaffrey
Light My Fire

Grace Church in Scarborough
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Come, Holy Spirit, Come. Amen