

5/30/2021

Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Pentecost: Fire

Last week was Pentecost Sunday, the day we intentionally remember when God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the first believers, otherwise known as the early church. They had witnessed Jesus' death, his resurrection and his ascension to heaven and were together waiting and praying together, as the first verse of our scripture says, "all together in one place" for this promised gift Jesus had told them would come to help them, this advocate that Jesus said God would send after Jesus ascended to heaven.

And on the day of Pentecost, as Jesus early followers were meeting and praying and waiting upon the Lord, God did send His Holy Spirit. Last week we talked about the first of the 3 signs of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost: **Wind**. The symbol of wind is such a great way to think about the Spirit because you can't see wind itself, but you can see the effects of wind. And last week I asked us all the question about if our lives looked more like

a kayak life or a sailboat life. Are we usually the ones rowing and working our way through life all on our own and getting exhausted trying to do life on our own or do we have more of a sailboat life that allows God's Spirit to move and guide us like wind that fills up sails of a sailboat and powers the boat to move.

But the sound of a mighty wind was only one of the 3 signs of God's Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The other two were **fire and speaking** in tongues. Today we'll focus on the sign of fire at Pentecost. Similarly to how we talked about last week regarding wind, the symbol of fire was no new way to think about God's presence. For the Jewish people, God's Spirit as fire was not a new idea. Some of the earliest examples are from the very first 2 books of the Bible. Let's look at 3 of those examples of fire in the Old Testament:

Perhaps the earliest mention of God's presence as fire seen by someone is way back in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in the account of Abraham. God had called this righteous man Abraham to leave his family's land, bring with him his wife, livestock, and possessions and God promised him that He would bless Abraham and his wife Sarah with many children and would give to them good land for them and their family to live

in. Well, many years passed without Abraham and Sarah bearing any children and claiming any land and so Abraham talked to God one day and was like, “Hey God, what’s up? Are you sure I heard you right? I think you said that Sarah and I were going to have descendants too numerous to count and uh...we don’t even have 1 kid yet. And I’m pretty sure you said we would have land to claim as our own and well, that’s not going super well either. Sarah and I are old, God. I’m doubting what I was so sure you told me all those years ago.”

And to answer Abraham, God had Abraham perform an ancient and (at the time) well known ceremony of covenant making. God told Abraham take a heifer, a goat, and a ram and divide them in half. After Abraham did this, God’s presence appeared as a “smoking firepot with a blazing torch” Genesis 15:17 says, and this fire passed between the two halves of the animals. The Lord was signifying that if God broke the covenant he was making to Abraham, may what was done to those animals be done to God Himself – a powerful symbol of God’s commitment and covenant love toward Abraham, Sarah, and his descendants.

The second place where fire shows up in the Old Testament scriptures as a symbol of God's presence is in the second book of the Bible: Exodus. You might remember that this story is one of my favorites. This one guy named Moses had run away from Egypt where he was raised as a part of the Pharaoh's very family and was tending his sheep on the side of a mountain when he came across the strangest of sights – **a bush that was engulfed in flames**, but the bush itself didn't seem to be burning up or getting destroyed in the fire. When Moses went closer to check out the bush, God spoke to Moses and tells him to take off his shoes for the place he was standing was Holy Ground. God then told Moses his mission: to go back to Egypt and request to Pharaoh that he let the Israelites go so that they could worship their Lord.

And finally the third big way that God's presence was revealed is a few chapters later in the book of Exodus. After God's people do finally get freed from Egypt, God helped guide them to safety with his very presence as a **"pillar cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night"** as Exodus 14 describes. With this pillar of cloud and fire, God's presence led His people away from Egypt and brought them to the Red Sea where they finally crossed to the other side of the sea on dry ground.

Those are just three of the moments in the Old Testament that God showed his presence to His people in the form of fire. And so as we learned last week with wind, the symbol of fire would have been a readily memorable sign to the early Christians – who were all Jewish and knew their scripture – that God’s (and therefore Jesus’) presence was among them with the tongues of fire on Pentecost. They would have known the foundational stories of their faith about Abraham, Moses, and the Israelites and just like in those stories, the sign of fire, to them, meant God was doing something big and very important.

But this scripture seems to be a bit different than those other examples we just talked about with Abraham, Moses, and the Israelites. In all those examples, the fire, God’s presence, was something that was separate, holy, and distinctly other. The smoking firepot and torch, the burning bush, and the pillar of cloud and fire: all these instances of God’s presence were instances when the fire of God interacts with people from a distance. God as something that is distinct from them offers a promise to Abraham, a mission to Moses, and guidance to the Israelites, but never were people touched by God’s presence.

But here in our scripture of the Pentecost, the fire of God, the presence of God, is no longer separate from the people of God – **no, the fire of God** comes and *rests upon* the believers. God's Holy presence that was once other, separate, and isolated is no longer those things. On the day of Pentecost something new happened that had never happened before. The day of Pentecost inaugurated something new between God and humanity – with the tongues of fire that came and rested upon the early believers, God's presence came and rested upon them. **Those early Christians on the day of Pentecost** were touched by God's very Spirit, enabling them to do amazing things like speaking in languages they didn't previously know how to speak in to tell people about the Good News of Jesus!

This was and is the new reality that God invited the earliest believers into AND is inviting you and me into today. And just like I talked with the kiddos up here, fire changes things and so does God's presence. Fire can warm up a cold room, fire can cook raw meat and turn it into something safe to eat, fire can change darkness into light, fire can burn up a piece of wood into ash. Fire...changes things. And the same goes for God's Holy Spirit. God's presence in a person's life can change a cold person into someone on fire with God's love.

I recently read a story about one man's experience with God's Spirit and how he was changed. He told his story like this: "I experienced Christ's unqualified love when I accepted his death for me. But I struggled all the time trying to love people. His spirit gave me a feeling of being loved; my problem still was loving. Christ was out there somewhere - an example - but I had no power to express what I'd experienced in hearing about the gospel. I guess I had enough to live forever, but I sure wasn't living abundantly. Then I heard about the in-dwelling spirit of Christ. Some Christian friends at work whom I meet with over lunch once a week told me the difference that made in their lives. They prayed for me, and since then I've been freer than I've ever been. It's as if all my experience as a Christian up to this point was like a low-burning pilot light without the burner going. It wasn't anything I did that set me on fire, except to ask. The great difference is in my relationships - especially with my wife and kids. There's no more of that "I'll love you if you do what I want" stuff. The judgmental attitudes that I had since I was a kid seemed to have changed completely. I can feel what people are feeling, what they are going through, and I want to do everything I can to help. What a difference! How'd I miss that all these years?" The Pentecost miracle of the Spirit's fire has been injected into this man. It's happening today!"

I love those last two sentences: “The Pentecost miracle of the Spirit’s fire has been injected into this man. It’s happening today!” God’s Holy Spirit, like fire, changes what it comes in contact with. Maybe you’re here this morning wanting to change...maybe you’ve even known for a long time that you need to change but you just can’t seem to figure out how to. Maybe your anger problem has grown, maybe your addiction no longer feels manageable, maybe your tired of your anxiety overpowering your relationships with your children, your grandchildren, your spouse, or with God, or maybe the words you use consistently seem to hurt people, or maybe your gossip has gotten you into trouble one too many times. Maybe all of the above, right? I know there are things in me that need changed, and I know I’m not alone.

What if what happened to this man (point at screen) happened to you? In this story, **remember he said**, “It wasn’t anything I did that set me on fire, except to ask.” What if you asked?

Explain the time of anointing and prayer after song.

Have people stand and here these words from Psalm 51.

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Sing together "Change My Heart O God"