

This morning we may better relate to the burned out than the on fire. We may grasp the pile of ashes over the blazing heat and light and power of the flames. The flaming fire of God had all but burned out with the arrival of Jesus the “Light of the World.” The gospel writers seemed to abandon the unpredictability of flames and fire in their narrative and redirected their readers and hearers to focus on the predictable clarity of God as light for a world and its inhabitants who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. This morning I am seeking such clarity; such focus because things seem, at least to me to be pretty bleak.

There are more of us dwelling in darkness and the shadow of death than there were just a few months ago. The global pandemic has wreaked havoc and left us with a mounting death toll globally the likes of which I have never witnessed. Oh we have been told; of the thousands who starve in a famine, of thousands who need medical treatment after an earthquake, of thousands left homeless after a Tsunami, and now the thousands upon thousands, no millions who need employment. We need light in the midst of such darkness. Oh there are plenty of folks claiming to send and deliver and bring and provide, and even create light for these dark times. Today in the life of the church we celebrate Pentecost, the rather unusual light that Jesus the light of the world sends.

Jesus’ followers listened to him that day at Bethany when he was taken up into heaven, Ascension, listening as he promised them the life giving Spirit. His followers were not accustomed to the sending methods we have been relying on during these days of sheltering in place: USPS, UPS, FEDEX, Amazon, Text, Email, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. So Jesus used the default setting and brought back the flaming fire of God! I have preached about this before:

The Flaming **sword** guarding the entrance to Eden’s garden

The Flaming **bush** startling Moses

The Flaming **pillar** leading the Israelites toward the Promised Land,

The Flaming **chariot and horses** taking Elijah up into

The Flaming **furnace of fire** where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were kept in safety, and how all of those stories lead us to the;

Flaming **tongues of fire** resting on those filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. That grabbed their attention and alerted them that God both needed them and God was about to do a new thing.

So now the Light of the World, Jesus, poured forth his Spirit on the gathered community and flaming tongues of fire rested on them and they prophesied, they told of God’s deeds of power. They told of: Eden’s garden, Moses’ call to serve, God’s abiding presence through the wilderness journey, Elijah’s assumption into heaven, King Nebuchadnezzar’s change of heart about the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and now the same God revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Flames in our world evoke different things at different times. We enjoy the glow of the flames of our Christmas Eve candle light service but lament the glow of flames of arson that destroyed our former church building in 1938. We are aware of people who we speak of as “On fire” or “aglow:” those newly ordained for Word and Service or Word and Sacrament ministry,

individuals set aside for lives of service in the church; for recent graduates this time of year who ablaze with energy and an unquenchable desire to learn and grow and discover, trek out on new paths. And yet we are keenly aware of people burnt out from stress, fear, hopelessness, and anxiety, people who got burned during the massive unemployment and layoffs and furloughs brought on by the pandemic and businesses going belly up. These days, it seems like things have been mounding up like a pile of ashes after the flames have dissipated and the fire has gone out.

The Holy Spirit's "mighty deeds of God" from the fourth gospel writer's perspective are very different from what we hear in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. In John we don't look back to what God has done so much in the past, but rather to the present and the future to what God is doing now and what God promises yet to do. The "mighty deeds of God" from the gospel of John: to forgive sin. It may not seem to you to be a great flame of fire, but it is the clarity of light that Jesus brings, forgiveness. Such clarity allows for new beginnings, fresh starts, God doing a new thing with you, through you, in you. That's what the disciples were waiting for that Pentecost Day. It was the flames of fire that made them aware of God doing a new thing.

Now, you may not think that you need to be forgiven. You may figure because you have been sheltering in place for so long that it is impossible for you to have done something for which you need forgiveness. Rest assured, we need to be forgiven for the thoughtless things that creep into our heads. We acknowledge that we are by nature sinful beings. Jesus comes to us offering peace and makes forgiveness the hallmark for those who bear his name. For John there is no flaming anything only the Resurrected One bestowing his spirit, his word of peace, and his gift of forgiveness for his followers. Look the person you are with in the eye, and gently tell them "In Christ, you are forgiven." And if you are alone right now, because many of us continue to shelter in place, write it down on a piece of paper and look at, say it out loud, "In Christ, you are forgiven." Believe it.

Our Pentecostal faith compels us to proclaim with confidence a story that will always bewilder, perplex, and amaze. This is God's way. God loves us so much that he sent us his son Jesus. Jesus takes away sin and offers peace, forgiveness and hope to all. Flaming tongues of fire rested on those filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. God's bewildering, perplexing, amazing Word of Hope, Jesus, comes to us: "In Christ, You are forgiven." We encounter the loving God who pours out everything for us. God's spirit poured out, sending us with a message of hope. Believe it. In Christ, you are forgiven. Amen.