

“The Fire This Time”

Acts 2: 1-21

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Day of Pentecost

One of the earliest stories in the Bible is about God and fire. Look at Exodus chapter 3, when that fugitive from the law, Moses, was hiding out from Pharaoh’s posse, he went to the wilderness and posed as a sheep herder.

One day, way up on a mountain he saw this burning bush. He climbed the mountain to look at it, he saw that the bush was on fire, but it was never burnt up, never burnt out. Astoundingly, God spoke to him out of the fire. This burning passionate God called Moses to go speak truth to Pharaoh’s death-dealing power.

Moses said, when people ask, who shall I say sent me? God gives this enigmatic reply, using a Hebrew word that translates: “I am who I am. I will be who I will be. I will cause to be what I cause to be. I create what I will create.” God answers without really giving an answer. Which is the answer.

God is on fire. God is free. There is a wonderful Latin phrase: *Deus revelatus atque abscondus*. God is revealed and hidden. Here and gone. It means this transcendent, passionate God won’t be tacked down, held back, philosophically defined, or reduced. God won’t be blocked, chained, clogged, crimped, deterred, encumbered, fettered, hindered, impeded, inhibited, or shackled. There will be no embargo on this God.

For Pharaoh and his Empire, it is the opposite. Pharaoh is all about bricks and mortar, beatings, policies, schemes, rocks to hold people down. Pharaoh uses chain gang labor to build mountains of rocks called Pyramids to symbolize that he and his empire are: Solid. Stable. Safe. As Bible Scholar Walter Brueggemanns says: The Empire is all about security, ideology, technology, certainty, and commodity. The Empire uses tools of death crafted to hold back and imprison the Spirit. Their goal is to destroy hope so they can keep the tools of power for themselves.

Yet all of Pharaoh’s schemes are brought down by the God of freedom symbolized in the fire of the burning bush.

Then the people of Israel go on a journey seeking the Promised Land. It takes them 40 years through the wilderness. What leads them at the front of their column? A flame of fire. They see its smoke by day; the fire they see by night. It is an image that reminds them: they are following the presence of this God who is free. This catalytic God, who, like fire, is changing them.

The earliest Jews loved the image of the burning bush as a metaphor for their life. They may be terribly oppressed, but they were never consumed. They felt the flames of the fire, but they were never burnt out. (See Brevard Child's outstanding commentary on Exodus for more on that).

They are touched and transformed by this God who is free like fire, who ignites his people to be on fire, on fire, yet never burned up and never burned out. This God whose name is free.

Like fire, this God is a catalyst. A catalyst that changes what it touches. The God of hope comes to the authentic hoppers. God present in the fire, present in the story, present in the Passion of the People of God.

That same fire experienced in the passionate life of Jesus, now comes to the early church. When Jesus was physically gone, and the Empire of Rome thought they had won, when the Empire of Rome told them the age of the prophetic voice was over and gone, history. Suddenly, the spark is lit, the fire comes anew.

The fiery passionate life of the Spirit of God comes and sits on the heads of every believer, young and old, men and women, Jew and Gentile. They do what the prophets of old did: they evoke a new consciousness, a new way of seeing, and a new world. A world of passion. Jesus made clear: It was possible to live a life of overflowing love. The Holy Spirit comes: to set ablaze in believers this fire that burned in the life of Christ can burn in you too. And when you live out that alternate reality the world will change. Pentecost is about a lot of things. But Pentecost is especially about this kind of fire.

A long time ago, I was a Boy Scout, on a camp out. I knew the key to a great fire is good tinder. I wanted the best fire ever, so I gathered Lots of exceedingly dry tinder. I put a match to the tinder way down deep, but did not realize it was lit. Instead of leaning back, I leaned into it. It took two weeks for me to grow back my eye brows. I, like Richard Pryor discovered, "When you on fire, people get outta your way."

Fire is about power. It can be a dangerous power. Don't misuse religion. But harnessed in the right way, our faith can offer a fire of the greatest transformation.

People in the modern world yearn for a life worth living -- something about which they can be passionate. Just listen to the voices in the culture.

Bruce Springsteen sings he's on fire;
Alicia Keys sings, This Girl's On Fire;
Bob Dylan sings, This Wheel's On Fire;
Eminem says his Fire Truck is on fire;
Metallica wants to Fight Fire with Fire;
Adele wants to Set Fire to the Rain.
Hunger Games Katniss Everdeen is called Girl Catching Fire;
[Stieg Larsson's](#) heroine is the Girl Who Played with Fire;

Harry Potter searches for the Goblet of Fire;
And Robert Fulghum writes, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down On It*.

But most powerfully, James Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*:

“Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”

Yes to the Fire Next Time. But Pentecost is not about next time, it is about the fire this time, when God calls us to daring and growth NOW. Fire is this image, this symbol for the church. The church on fire: filled with passion, heat, power, cleansing, catalytic transformation, spreading love, and most of all God’s irresistible, unstoppable freedom.

Pentecost is about people who come together, and discover the power of God igniting them into a world transforming community. Pentecost is about the catalytic fire of God where the church encounters people of every kind of difference nation, race, language, sexuality, the church comes together to make all of them feel heard and understood.

Pentecost is about the fundamental things that can bring peace in the world. Surprised by the Spirit: the world discovers it needs this people who have learned the language of God’s love. Ignited by the Holy Spirit, all of a sudden, the people of the church got set on fire. People started moving!

On fire with the Holy Spirit, old ideas turned into ashes. God ignites the fire of Pentecost to light the fuse of love. Pentecost means that God has work for you to do.

Reuter’s News Service ran a story awhile back about a man named Richard Ankrom. He lives in Los Angeles. He is a professional artist. A few years ago he was driving through downtown L.A. on Interstate 5. There was this sign that was somewhere between misleading and downright confusing. Ankrom carefully followed the directions the sign gave and got thoroughly lost.

He thought about it every time he drove past that sign. This experience stuck with him. Rather than lodging a complaint, he went to his art studio and painted a new sign with clear directions. The signs were painted to the exact specifications used by the California Transportation Authority. Then in broad daylight, he put on a hard hat and orange vest, went out on the freeway and put up the sign.

The sign hung there for nine months, helping who knows how many hundreds of thousands of drivers. Finally, he told the Department of Transportation about it. They kept the sign up for 7 years! And when they put up a new sign, they followed his example.

He said, “It needed to be done.” He says he has done other signs: but now he does not tell anyone for 7 years. Until the statute of limitations is up.

I do not, I repeat, I do not advocate climbing up an interstate sign with your own version. This is a metaphor!

But I love that story because he had so much passion. What is it that you honestly believe needs to be done? What is God leading you to do? Not with arrogance, but with pure unbounded love?

Ask yourself and one another: What is God calling us to do? To be? What haunts you in the middle of the night? What keeps gnawing at your conscience? The Holy Spirit might well have implanted a fuse in you, and is waiting for the spark to catch to set you on fire. To set the church ablaze with love.

I'd like to close with another story. It is about a church that was celebrating the 150th anniversary of its founding. To mark the event, they decided they wanted to raise \$150,000 for the homeless. At this time, they had an interim pastor.

We all know nothing much is going to happen when you have an interim pastor. Nevertheless, this interim pastor challenged the church that God was not calling them to raise \$150,000 for one year, but 1.5 Million to put in an endowment that would yield \$100,000 to help the homeless every year forever! The idea caught on like wildfire, and they did it!

The initials for that church are House of Hope!

Celebrating Pentecost means the church remembers we never know when this passionate God is going to show up and empower us to do something world-changing. We do know that God gives us a passionate heart:

Where there is hurt in the world, God gives hope. Where there is a hurt in the world, God gives the House of Hope. That hope is what this church stands for. That hope burns within you. Get ready for the burn!

Pay attention to those sparky ideas. God gives us the power and the passion to be a people of explosive hope. Get ready for the Holy Spirit to ignite that fire in you. And you ignite the fire in the rest of us. The Fire this time!

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James Baldwin. *The Fire Next Time*.

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Walter Brueggemann. *The Prophetic Imagination*, Second Edition. Fortress Press.

Walter Brueggemann. *Mandate to Difference*. Westminster/John Knox Press.

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