

Wind and Fire

Delivered on May 23, 2010

Acts 2:1-11

Do you remember the Chicago fire of 1871--the one attributed to Mrs. O'Leary's cow? I did some reading on that historical event not too long ago. After the fire ignited Mrs. O'Leary's barn, and by the way, it is now thought that milk thieves and not a cow, knocked over the kerosene lamp there—anyway, after the fire ignited Mrs. O'Leary's barn, it went on to engulf a church. Next, a strong wind carried the flames across the south branch of the Chicago River. Wooden buildings used to store firewood and commercial lumberyards lined the shores of the Chicago River. These fed the flame as did too wooden ships anchored in the River's harbor. Plank roads and sidewalks abutted the river and crisscrossed the city. Wind carried the blaze from the storehouses and lumberyards to the plank roads and sidewalks of Chicago; then the wind whooshed the flames up to the wood shingled roofs of peoples' wood homes. Chicago was, in fact, a city of wood and so the city became like one gigantic burning match head.

The conflagration lasted two days. When the last embers died, the stunned, homeless, soot-smearing people of Chicago noted that only a few structures remained standing. These were Chicago's Water Tower, St. Michael's Church, Old Saint Patrick's Church and Chicago's Pumping Station. They didn't burn because they were constructed of brick or metal—not wood.

The bottom line is, wind and fire separately and together are not powers that are altogether welcome. Wind is potentially dangerous, fire is potentially dangerous--together they can make for an unwelcome and even dangerous combo as they did in October 1871 in Chicago.

But the wind and fire of Pentecost were not **d**estructive, were they? They were **c**onstructive, or so we read in today's passage from the second chapter of Acts.

It happened like this. After Jesus' crucifixion, he returned to the disciples and lived among them over a forty day period. Then, as you learned last week if you were here, Jesus ascended into heaven, but not before promising that the Holy Spirit would come to lead the now leaderless band. As Jesus ascended, he instructed the disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait there.

That is exactly what the disciples did.

Then, on Pentecost, which is a Jewish harvest festival that occurs fifty (pente means fifty) days after the Passover, when the city is filled with Jews who have come from a great distance—Ethiopia and Egypt to name two distant lands, the Holy Spirit **finally** makes an appearance. The disciples, including a new disciple elected to replace Judas, wait patiently in an upper room, somewhere in Jerusalem. When the spirit comes, it is a fire born on a fierce wind—it comes to burn away their grief, their depression and their sluggishness—it blows away the dust and cobwebs of the past and makes all things new. It cleanses, it invigorates. The freshly inspired disciples run out into the streets of

Jerusalem—like the Pentacostal preachers they are, they preach and teach with arms flailing, voices booming, shaking and sweating, nostrils flaring and eyes wide open.

The winds and fire of Pentecost are always interpreted in church in a positive light—and for good reason--without them the fledgling Christ movement would not have gained momentum. In Acts 2:41, we read that three thousand were baptized that day. That's a totally good thing, right? And yet, we know for a fact there were those in Jerusalem who decried the Holy Spirit's coming. Those wild-eyed disciples were a threat. They were set on a course that would eventually divide Jews into opposing camps: Christ followers and non-Christ followers. So, again I ask you, are the wind and fire of Pentecost CONstructive or are they DEstructive as were the wind and fire in Chicago? The answer of course is BOTH and in that lies a definite tension.

Tension. Tension is everywhere in our Biblical narrative and of course, as Bible readers yourself you already know that. We've all done it. Probably when you were a young person—say a teenager or a young adult. You had a decision to make—like whether to drink beer with your buddies on a Thursday night or study for an exam. Just for the heck of it you consulted your Bible like it was a magic eight ball or a ouiji board. After a thorough search you found a passage that seemed to relate: “**Wine** is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.” That's from Proverbs. Then, just when you thought you'd have to hunker down and study, you found a second-- “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.” From Ecclesiastes. Sweet!

I don't know for sure, but wouldn't you guesstimate that about 90% of the bible is about sticking to the old ways? I mean by that that it's past oriented. As a for instance, there's God's command to remember the past. Remembering is definitely big with God. God tells us to remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy. God says “Remember you were once slaves in Egypt.” God tells the Jews to keep scripture as a frontlet before their eyes—a frontlet is a little pouch with a scroll of scripture inside tied to the head—and God tells the Jews to post scripture on their door posts—the frontlets and the mazzooza on the doorpost are memory tools for remembering what God said—in the past. And yet, in Isaiah we read, “Do NOT remember the former things; or consider the things of old. I am about to do a NEW THING.” And here in our passage for today, the wind and fire of Pentecost are meant to blow and burn away the old and enthuse the disciples with visions and dreams. Pentecost is totally future oriented. What of that? That's tension.

One idea I had this week, as I thought about past and future, is that God points us toward the future when looking to the past becomes too painful. Remembering the past can be **very** painful. As a for instance, after I accepted this call here, I sold our family home of 20 years. By that time, my daughters were at least in college, Emily, the oldest was in grad school. The girls were involved in my move. They helped with a yard sale. They came with me to Coveseville--toting boxes from my car to the manse. Helping me place furniture and hang curtains.

Then months after the sale of the house and my move here, my daughter Joy, in college in Williamsburg, had a particularly brutal week. I forget the circumstances now--a

breakup with a boyfriend maybe. At any rate, she desperately needed the comforts of home. On a Friday afternoon, Joy packed up her overnight bag, jumped in her car and headed toward Northern Virginia. She got all the way to McLean, pulling her car up to the curb in front of our old house, before she realized that she had no home in McLean to go home TO anymore...She says she sat in her car and wept—bitterly.

Or take for instance, a true story I heard at the conference I attended last week. A female colleague said that her church had made many inroads in accepting women in leadership positions. Not only was she the pastor, but women served as deacons and elders, too. But one December she got a phone call from one of her parishioners. She wondered if the church might return to the old tradition of having only men serve as ushers on Christmas Eve. The pastor was wise enough not to take the request as a personal attack against women in ministry. That parishioner was merely grieving a time gone by, when men ushers wore red rose boutonnières in their dark suit coat lapels on Christmas Eve, and Christmas itself seemed oh so genteel and well, familiar.

If God is compassionate it makes sense that God encourages us to look toward the future so that we can avoid the pain associated with our yearning for the past. Except that that theory doesn't mesh with my daughter's experience— it doesn't mesh with my own experiences, I doubt it meshes with your experiences and it definitely doesn't mesh with the New Testament story. Although I believe down to the very marrow of my bones that God is compassionate, as far as I can tell, God hasn't alleviated my suffering, when it comes to memories, or physical ailments or anything else—how about yours? Certainly, we all know that God did not alleviate Jesus' suffering on the cross. Better to say that God allows us to suffer. Why that is so, I haven't a clue—**BUT God never ever allows us to suffer alone.**

No, God asks us to forget; God turns us to the future, not because remembering the past may be painful-- God creates Pentecost moments in our lives, like moving away from home and opening our churches to women in ministry, because sometimes holding onto the past is no longer doing us any favors—sometimes holding onto the past cuts us off from new possibilities. Without Pentecost the Christ movement would have died. The disciples would have eventually grown wrinkled and toothless and leaning on their canes, they would have reminisced to a dwindling crowd or no crowd at all, about the three years they spent with Jesus, when for one brief shining moment hope was alive in the world—all in the past tense.

Returning to the Chicago fire, although St. Michael's brick exterior survived the fire, four bronze bells in its bell tower atop the church, melted, and crashed through the roof. The interior of Saint Michael's, mostly wood, was completely consumed by the flames. Did the good parishioners at St. Michael's sit in the rubble and weep? Probably for a time, but only a time. St. Michael's was the first church in devastated Chicago to be rebuilt. What a fine cathedral rose up from those ashes! The new St. Michael's, which still stands today, sports a bell tower with four bronze bells, a 290 foot spire, and a grand pipe organ. In the late 1800s and early 1900's St. Michael's primary purpose was to serve Chicago's many German and Polish immigrants. In the mid-1900's it served a growing immigrant Puerto Rican population and today it still serves the Chicago community in a myriad of ways. It stands as a testament to the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so may our lives and this church, too, stand as testaments to the Holy Spirit. Are you ready for the tongues of Pentecost to descend upon YOUR heart? Amen