

The Feast of Pentecost, Year C – June 5, 2022
“There’s Really Only One Way to Learn About Fire”
ST. THOMAS’ EPISCOPAL CHURCH
ST. PETERSBURG, FL
Acts 2: 1-21 • Psalm 104: 25-35, 37 • Romans 8: 14-17 • John 14: 8-17



I suppose when you get right down to it, there’s really only one sure way to learn about fire. Let a match burn too long as you try to light a candle. Carelessly brush your exposed skin against the grill while cooking out. Mindlessly reach across the campfire ring to take a proffered s’ more. The end result is the same, the lesson never changes. Burning.

Though it’s much *en vogue* to refer to a preacher as prophetic (beware the preacher who labels themselves such), no person of substance wants the job of prophet. It should come with hazard pay but never does, and there’s a lot of travel. Moses tried to turn it aside, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent...”; Zechariah rejected the title, “I am no prophet, I am a tiller of soil,”; and Amos told King Amaziah in no uncertain terms it wasn’t even in his blood, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son.” Jeremiah hated the idea. He said that when he spoke as the Lord directed him, they wanted to kill him and ran him out of town at the point of a sword. But when he

was silent, “then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones.” I suppose when you get right down to it, there’s really only one sure way to learn about fire. Burning.

A burning settled on those early Christians on the Day of Pentecost so long ago, and they would learn the hard way what it meant. But it was from God, so there wasn’t much they could do about it. Jeremiah had taught them that. If they’d thought about it for a minute, maybe they wouldn’t have been as surprised. But then again, burning tongues of fire on your head probably always comes with that element. Before it meant wear red in church, Pentecost was known by a different name to our Jewish friends. They called it Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, and for many Jews it commemorated the day on which God had delivered to Moses their great gift, the Torah. So they should have been put in mind of Mount Sinai and the storied journey it took to arrive there, a journey God led them on in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and column of fire by night. They should have been put in mind of the fact that God descended on Sinai in fire and smoke. But perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised they didn’t remember. It only took them a few hours to not remember God and replace him with a

golden calf. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised they didn't remember God; we forget God all the time. And so, on that day on Sinai God came among the people in wind and flame. And on that day when Peter addressed the crowd God came among the people in wind and flame. Surely they saw it coming? But they had forgotten the lessons of their ancestors (let those with ears to hear, hear!) and so they were bewildered. There's really only one sure way to learn about fire, and so they were taught again.

All those to whom God comes, God makes to burn and to speak teaches St. Bede. To burn because of God's love, which is powerful, and to speak about God so that God will be made known. Jesus said that we were to go to the ends of the earth to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And if we are to go to the ends of the earth then we will need to speak their languages, to make God known. So God's fire burns in us and when we speak we are understood. See, this day of Pentecost, the new mount Sinai moment, this is the reversal of the Tower of Babel. At the Tower of Babel, people wanted to build a way to reach God and thus gain some special status or knowledge. But that has never been the way of God. By trying to elevate humanity to God, people destroyed

their capacity to understand one another, but by receiving the flame and wind of the Holy Spirit, confusion turns to communion. The Spirit empowers us in Pentecost to break through all the barriers frail humanity set up: barriers of race, creed, doctrine, nationality, time, and yes, language. In Pentecost, division becomes union. That which was torn apart is stitched together. See, we don't have to build a tower to get to God; God has always wanted to come to us. So when tongues of fire descended upon the heads of those disciples, they should've remembered, there's really only one way to learn about fire.

Fire never leaves you the same. It leaves a mark. It transforms. It makes way for something new. Where is the fire of Pentecost landing in your life this year? What way needs to be lit for you by the column of fire at night? What division needs to be burned out of you by the flames of the Holy Spirit? What hope needs to be ignited in you by the God who calls you by name? Fire is a sign of God's gifts, God's grace. To the early Jewish people, fire brought direction, hope, guidance, protection, and ultimately, the Law. To the early Christians, fire brought understanding, unity, belonging, power, and ultimately, the greatest gift, the Advocate, the

Comforter, the Holy Spirit. When you get right down to it, there's really only one sure way to learn about fire. Let it fall on you, let it transform you, let it empower you, let it embolden you to live the life to which you have been called as a Christian: a life that proclaims with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus who was crucified, died, and rose again. That fire that is shut up in your bones, let it out, that all may hear and be saved, even to the ends of the earth!

Amen.