**Tongues of Fire**

*Acts 2:1-21*

Have you ever seen a man eat fire? Imagine you were the guy that invented this. “I’m going to put a flaming ball of fire into my mouth.” How many attempts did it take him before he could do it without burning his hair off? It’s crazy. It’s bizarre. But it sure draws a crowd.

You can’t say that the Holy Spirit doesn’t know how to draw a crowd. On Pentecost, there’s this great sound of a rushing wind that suddenly sweeps over the disciples. Then tongues of fire separate and remain on the heads of Jesus’ followers. And then they begin to speak in different tongues, in different languages, empowered by the Spirit. And as they speak, others gather around from all over, wondering what it all means. These tongues of fire on their heads and the tongues of fire in their mouths did exactly what they were supposed to do. These tongues were calling all to look and to listen, as we are called to share God’s wonders.

The tongues of fire that appeared and rested on each one of the disciples were primarily for the disciples themselves. They were all together in one place at the time of the festival of Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks. They were sitting, which probably means that they were listening to a sermon by one of the apostles. Before His ascension ten days earlier, Jesus had instructed all of them to wait in Jerusalem for power from on high. Now it was coming to them. John the Baptist once had proclaimed that Jesus would baptize people with the Holy Spirit and with power. Now it was coming true. We don’t need to assume that it was only the 12 apostles or only men here. The prophesy that Peter quotes in a while mentions both sons and daughters prophesying. So for all of the disciples there, these tongues of fire appeared.

The shape, the source, and the nature of the fire gave a hint at what these signs were going to be all about. First, I think we’re so used to the phrase “a tongue of fire” that we never think about why we call it that. You’ll find the phrase in the Old Testament once, but you’ll also find the word for tongue for all sorts of things that are a wedge shape. And if you stick out your tongue and make it come to a point, you could see how that kind of looks like a flame of fire. It’s round and fat at the bottom and comes to a tip at the end. So of all the signs that the Holy Spirit could have chosen, He chose one that looked like a tongue, to let them know that He was about to do a miracle that had to do with their speech. Second, it says that the tongues of fire “separated and came to rest on each of them.” You can imagine that there was one flame, and from that one flame came out each individual tongue of fire. Why not just make a bunch of little flames to start? It indicated that the message that they would be sharing would be unified. They wouldn’t be given the ability to speak all...
these different languages just to speak whatever random theological thought they happened to dream up on their own. Under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, they would share God’s message with the people. Finally, the Holy Spirit chose fire. Fire does not leave things unchanged. It can burn or it can purify. So also what they are about to do will make big changes in the lives of people.

It seems that the tongues of fire did not remain long. It says, “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?’” You notice that they don’t say, “These guys have tongues of fire resting on their heads!” That’s what I would have said! But the sound of the wind and the effect of the Spirit’s work still called the surrounding people to look and to listen.

It definitely caught their attention that these uneducated, back-water hicks from Galilee were suddenly speaking in a multitude of languages. But getting their attention only matters if there is something to say. The disciples certainly had something to say. These tongues of fire set their own tongues on fire as they proclaimed the wonders of God.

What did they preach? Theirs was a message of both law and gospel. Peter goes on to preach a fiery sermon. It says that it cut them to the heart. Maybe we have been tempted with the thought that we need to back off on the law. Maybe we think that churches have to be more understanding. And maybe we think that because there is some sharp word of Scripture that cuts us to the heart too, and it hurts. We want the hurt to stop. Peter message was, “You killed the Son of God!” He said, “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” And who of us hasn’t heard some person come to us with a clear, sharp word from Scripture that calls us out? Who of us hasn’t wished that the person was mistaken, or overstating his case, or misinterpreting things, or wish that surely he was drunk? But that word of rebuke that cuts us to the heart is from the same undivided Word of God, inspired by this same Holy Spirit. People go off talking about how they would like another Pentecost, another awakening of the Church, another awesome manifestation of God’s power, but they close up their ears to the very words of the one who did all of this in the first place. We need all of these words of the law to first burn away all of our fortifications, to incinerate our sinister insistence that I can love God and love my sin at the same time. When that fellow Christian comes with that blazing tongue to light us up in our resistance, this is the Holy Spirit’s undivided speech to you. They asked what they could do. Peter’s response still rings true. “Repent.”
Can this message still grab people today, even without the impressive show from the Holy Spirit? I say that it has to. For within each person, there is a nagging feeling that all is not right. And there are a thousand voices trying to tell people that we must harden ourselves against the dull cutting of the conscience, that we must shift blame to other people, to outside problems, and lousy environments. They say that to call a sin “sin” is hatred, and not love. But still people know they will not find the peace they need there. And that is the common thread in every human heart, whether the person is an old valley girl or a city boy who’s new in town, whether they are a teenager getting ready to go turn the world upside down, or an elderly person who’s had the world turned on him. The law of God echoes truth in our hearts, and we know it to be true. We must listen to God and His Word.

Then, and only then, will we be able to know the thrill that 3,000 people had that day. Certainly the wonders of God that the disciples were proclaiming that day were not all the acts of judgment of our God, but certainly also His mercies. Yes, you murdered Christ, but even in that murder, He paid for your sins. God the Father has made Him both Lord and Christ. All enemies, yes the ones that snared you, now lie under His feet. Repent, and see what He says! It will be for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit who gave a special, singular power to the disciples that day, still gives His more common general gift. He brings Christ into your heart. He connects you to the one who washes away all of your sins. He leads you to call on the name of the Lord. And all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

This is the message that wakes us from the stupor of sin. This is the message that has set your heart on fire. This is the message that is a fire in our mouths, to tell others, yes, their sins condemn, but Christ who was crucified forgives! He is greater than our sins! He saves us from them.

Amen.

First preached by Pastor Jansen on May 12, 2016.