

Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 23
Day of Pentecost

"Breath of Fire"
Carol Stepp, Youth Pastor

This passage begins with one hundred twenty gathered together for a Jewish festival called Shavuot, which occurs fifty days after Passover. That is where the "Pente" comes from in Pentecost! The apostle Luke vividly describes the coming of the Holy Spirit. It comes with the sound of a rushing wind, an apparition of tongues resting on each head and the gift of the ability to speak in other languages. Then the phenomenon shifts to thousands of outsiders who witness this spectacle. These include not only devout Jews but men, women, children, slave, free or Greek immigrants from all over the known world at that time which is now known as the Mediterranean Basin.

Hear the Word of the Lord as found in the **second chapter of Acts , verses 1 thru 8 and 11b thru 21 .**

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

...then picking up verse 11b the scripture goes on to say....

^{11b} In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ 'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Can you imagine sitting in this Sanctuary and suddenly everyone around you starts to speak in a different language. Listen to the noise. It is almost deafening. The voices fly past each other so fast that it makes your head spin....

What a huge multisensory overload! Can you imagine the cacophony of sounds? It's probably something like being at an international gate LaGuardia! But

somehow in this whirl we can all understand those different voices! Just envision the power it would take to make this astonishing moment happen.

Would it be a miracle? a spiritual possession? Paranormal activity? Whatever it was, it would likely freak you out!

I mean, what would YOU THINK if great licks of fire came and lit on people's heads around you? Would you politely lean forward and say, "Your hair is on fire?" Would you run for a bucket of water and the fire extinguisher, or would you scream for everyone to "stop, drop, and roll?" I must admit, I'd be tempted to do all three. But suddenly, to your amazement these flames burn but do not consume these people but instead enlightens them. Suddenly everyone understands everyone...regardless of the language, cultural and political differences? Now that would be refreshing, especially in this day and age! I think you would be astonished and confused *not because you cannot understand each other*, but because you can.

I think it may have been somewhat like that for the followers of Jesus, gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. This first event in the life of the church started indoors with one hundred twenty Jews, but then moved outdoors to thousands of other immigrants from the entire Mediterranean Basin. The gift was not for a select few, not just for chosen minority in that upper room—but God's spirit of enlightenment is gifted to everyone in Jerusalem. And this Holy Fire continues to burn. 2000 years later. God must be doing something right!

What I find interesting here is that this gift of the Holy Spirit is only experienced by people *who are gathered together* in this story: It starts in the long-standing community of assembled disciples, and then quickly bleeds over and out into the crowds in the street into that new community of strangers that has suddenly been formed. And then somehow God uses this community and this gift to begin to change the world.

In the same way, I think God has put us together in this community of faith. Individually we do not have 'the right tools', but all together we have to do what needs to "get her done!" As Aristotle says, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." The Holy wind and fire are sweeping through Woodlawn right now. Just pause and listen for it. It is here helping us understand and love each other. Perhaps the most amazing thing God does is to break down the walls that divide us from one another, so that we can see that this we are better

together. Like a cup of coffee and a sunrise. You see, the Power of the Holy Spirit is not just found in the wind and the flames, but together they foreshadow the amazing events yet to come. The Power of the Spirit is discovered between us and among us and in us **in community**.

I think it is best summed up in Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Junior's reflection on "***The Softer Side of Pentecost***." Nelson says "perhaps there is also a kind of wonderful madness in the spirit imparted by Jesus to those frightened disciples. In the house in Jerusalem, when he breathed on them, that desperate, frightened, diverse bunch became a church. Yes, they became a church, worshiping God, writing scriptures, praying and singing together, together seeking to do God's will. They became a church, going out and serving other people, hurting when other's hurt, caring when no one else would, emptying their pockets to help the children of people they didn't even know, painting the house of a disabled person when their own house was in need of repair. They empowered each other to do things and be things they could never have managed on their own. Who were these people? They are the people on whom God has breathed. They are the people on whom Christ has breathed. We are these people - people who have received the Holy Spirit. So let us dare to open ourselves to receive it; to address it and be addressed by it; to move in the direction that it seeks to move us, which is the direction of fuller and deeper communion with itself and with one another..."

COME HOLY SPIRIT AND REST ON US! AMEN!