

Pentecost, Year B  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
May 23, 2021

Several of you were at the 6 am Easter sunrise service this year. It was the first in-person service that we had hosted at the church in a year. We met in the pre-dawn dark. It was cold. Several volunteers worked to put up chairs, make an altar, and get everything ready for the service. It was one of the most moving services I have ever been to, and I think that had to do with the mystical feeling in the air between night and day, between dark and light, between Good Friday and Easter. To begin the service, I said some of the most ancient prayers known to the church:

*Exult, let them exult, the hosts of heaven, exult, let Angel ministers of God exult, let the trumpet of salvation. sound aloud our mighty King's triumph! Be glad, let earth be glad, as glory floods her; ablaze with light from her eternal King, let all corners of the earth be glad, knowing an end to gloom and darkness.*

And as the prayers finished, I lit the great fire of Easter, the mother flame of the entire church year that symbolizes the presence of God among us. Except that I used way too many fire starters and I almost burned down the table. At one point, I was worried that I was going to catch the deacon on fire or that one of the neighbors was going to call the police. Undeterred, I kept up with the prayers, but it was really touch-and-go there for a few minutes.

We aren't the only ones who have long associated the power of fire with the spark of God. The ancient Greeks told the story of Prometheus who stole fire from Mt. Olympus and brought it down to mortals. And countless cultures see the fire of the sun as the king of all the gods. Closer to home, our scriptures ask the question over and over: where is the fire of God?

For our Jewish ancestors, the answer was simple. Godself was first in the pillar of fire that led the Hebrews from Egypt into Canaan. Then that same fire lived in a tabernacle that roamed the wilderness with God's chosen people. Later God's fire lived inside a tent and eventually a temple. And when that temple, the one that housed God's essence, was destroyed by foreign enemies, the people of God did not stop their praising and did not stop their worship. At that moment, they realized that the fire of God lived in the person of Jesus, their friend. Jesus became the Christ and promised that His fire would be with us always.

In some ways, we continue to ask that question: where is the fire of God? Is it in our buildings? Maybe. Is it in our service to others? Probably. Is it in our homes? I certainly hope so. In fact, Christians over the centuries have had many arguments trying to figure out where the fire of God lives. Is it in this country? Is it with this ruler? Is it in this religion or that religion?

And I think the story of Pentecost, the feast that we celebrate today, answers the question, at least for us Christians. The fire of God is with us now. Not exclusively in a building. Not exclusively in a priest. Not even exclusively in the scriptures. The story of Pentecost happens OUTSIDE with a bunch of illiterate people, receiving from on high the power to go into the world and heal what is broken while telling God's stories. From the moment that Jesus left the disciples, they were empowered to preach and to cast out demons. And that fire has been spreading from Christian to Christian for two thousand years. Until it finds us here, in Wisconsin, at the end of a terrible and bruising year, weary for normalcy at church, and still uncertain about what our future brings.

But we have no reason to fear. We are the divine fire bearers. We are no more holy and no more sinful than were those first apostles. If they can move through the world in peace and power to the glory of God then I see no reason why we can't either. They put on their pants one leg at a time just like we do.

Pentecost is a reminder that we are filled with God's power. And after a year like this one, it might be tempting to think that we aren't. But that fire didn't go out because we had to meet on zoom. And that fire won't go out because we are having to make very difficult decisions about the physical plant of St. Mark's. The church was empowered for this work two thousand years ago, and in the grand scheme of things, our struggles seem smaller. Are we offering radical kindness to the strangers who walk into these doors? Are we affirming the full humanity of every person we meet? Are we feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and demanding justice from the powerful? These are the things that we are empowered to do with God's fire. The rest will take care of itself in time.

I may have overdone it on the fire that I made on Easter morning. But, really, surely that is what the disciples felt like when they say the flames come down from heaven — that God had somehow overdone it. But for God, abundance is in God's very nature. And so we are gifted with more love than we can give away, more power than we can ever use, and more faith than we need to get through the rough times. Happy Pentecost, and Happy Birthday, Church. Amen.