

“Fighting Fire With Fire”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Pentecost
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First Scripture Lesson: Ezekiel 37:1-14

¹The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” ⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

Second Scripture Lesson: Acts 2:1-18

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet

Joel: ¹⁷In 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. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.



Sermon: “Fighting Fire with Fire”

Today is Pentecost, a day on which we celebrate one of the defining moments in the history of the Christian church. But, contrary to what you may have heard, Pentecost is *not* the day the Holy Spirit came into the world, though that’s the way we’ve traditionally thought about Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit is not something new that arrives for the first time on Pentecost. And point of fact, the Holy Spirit is not even some~~thing~~ at all. The Holy Spirit is some~~one~~. The Holy Spirit is God’s presence in the world which does not arrive into the world on Pentecost because She has always been in the world.

In Genesis 1:1-2, the very beginning of our Judeo-Christian story, the world is formless and void but the Spirit of God is there, “moving over the face of the waters.”¹

And when Joseph is called upon to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh, Pharaoh is impressed with Joseph’s wisdom and the way that God works through him to interpret dreams and Pharaoh asks those around him “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the Spirit of God?”²

In Numbers, God says that Joshua, the eventual successor of Moses, is a man “in whom is the Spirit.”³

And in the story of Samson, he of the super strength and the long hair and questionable relationship decisions, we are told that in his youth the Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him⁴ and that on three separate occasions, he exhibited great feats of strength after the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him.⁵

In a passage read commonly during the seasons of Advent, Isaiah describes the promised Messiah saying:

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”⁶

There are other references, but you get the point. We celebrate the Day of Pentecost as the day when the Holy Spirit came into the world, but God’s Spirit has always been in the world.

I totally get it though. The trinity is tough enough to understand. We keep speaking of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we affirm that in those three, there is only one God; unified yet distinct. But we struggle to make sense of that concept. It simply makes no sense to our logical brains because 1+1+1 does not equal 1 . . . except, apparently, in trinitarian theology.

So, we cheat a little. Not intentionally . . . but it’s just hard not to. We separate the inseparable. We compartmentalize elements that are unified. We think of God creating the world and then running things from a giant control room in the sky; watching everything, pushing buttons, pulling levers, making it all

happen. Sure, God may take the occasional stroll around the planet to check on things first hand, but God is generally up in heaven, running things. Listening to children's bedtime prayers, helping Tom Brady win football games, finding you a parking spot close to the front door, things like that.

And then at some point, God sends Jesus down from heaven to earth to get His hands dirty with the work of proclaiming the gospel and saving humanity.

And after Easter and the resurrection, Jesus steps onto a heavenly escalator and rides up into the clouds, leaving the disciples alone for a while until Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes rushing down out of the sky, sort of like Jesus' vacation replacement (you know, until Jesus comes back). And the Spirit takes up the work God began back in the Old testament, and that Jesus continued in the Gospels.

And while that narrative may make it easier to wrap our heads around the mystery of our trinitarian God, it is flawed, because, in addition to a whole host of other problems, that narrative does not acknowledge that God's Holy Spirit has always been present in the world around us.

So, what we celebrate is not the coming of God's Spirit into the world, but the disciples experiencing that Spirit washing over them, filling them, and empowering them to do the work of the Kingdom. By the power of God's Spirit, they are enabled to speak in languages that had not previously known. They share the gospel message, and people from all corners of the known world are able to hear them in their own languages.

But while that is an impressive thing, it is just the beginning. For Jesus' command for them was to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching everything Jesus commanded them.⁷ This small band of believers is supposed to make disciples of all nations and teach them everything? How can they ever hope to accomplish such a task?

Well, they can't. But God can. And Pentecost is that moment when God's spirit in the world sets about urging and molding and shaping the early church and then moving and pushing and encouraging the early church to grow and spread and become what God envisioned it becoming.

And see, that's why God's Holy Spirit is so important in the world and that's why Pentecost is so important to the church. Because there is so much that we are supposed to do, and we simply can't do it by ourselves. But thank God we don't have to, because God is with us, guiding us, strengthening us for the work of building the Kingdom.

But the Holy Spirit tends to get lost in our study and worship. We Presbyterians have never been too sure how to talk about the Holy Spirit. The Apostle's Creed which many of us learned from early on in our lives, makes almost no mention of Her. We get lots of words about God the Father and God the Son, but the only mention of the Holy Spirit is to say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

And then we look at other traditions and the whole dancing in the aisles thing and clapping in church and speaking in tongues; things that are such an anathema to who we are, and we take an attitude of "Well, if that's what the Holy Spirit is all about, then count me out."

But I'm going to tell you today we should celebrate the Holy Spirit and open ourselves more to the Spirit's leading. Because you fight fire with fire.

I know, I just lost about half of you. But stay with me.

I don't know who originally said that you have to fight fire with fire, but I know that the first person to commit that general idea to paper was William Shakespeare. In one of his lesser known works entitled *King John*, Shakespeare includes this line:

*"Be stirring as the time; be fire with fire;
Threaten the threatener and outface the brow of bragging horror."*⁸

The idea being that it is best to respond to an attack with a similar tactic as the attacker. I can see this isn't really a Shakespearean audience, so I'll put it another way. In the movie *The Untouchables*, Sean Connery's character is explaining to Elliott Ness how to get Al Capone:

*"They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the ... morgue. That's the Chicago way!"*⁹

Being a disciple is nowhere near that hardcore, but you get the picture. And on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples in the early church "like tongues of fire" and for what purpose is that fire of the Spirit present? To overcome the fires of hell.

Now let me stop for a moment to say that I do not believe in a literal hell, which is to say a place of punishment for those who either do evil in this life or who do not accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. I simply do not think our God works that way. I know there are some references in the Bible that are traditionally used to defend the existence of hell and there is a wealth of cultural imagery that has developed the idea. Dante's *Inferno* is perhaps chief among them.

But I don't believe a God of grace and compassion, who desires the salvation of the world, then turns and punishes those who simply cannot understand or accept, or who have never known what it is to be loved by God. That was a central thesis of Evangelical Pastor Rob Bell's book *Love Wins*.¹⁰

And in *Christian Doctrine*,¹¹ Presbyterian theologian and seminary professor Shirley Guthrie wrote that hell is "Not a fiery or dark place of eternal torment located somewhere between the United States and China. It is living apart from or in hostility toward God and other people...".

But I would argue that Hell does exist, just not in the fiery, pitchfork-carrying devil sort of way. Because for many people, life in this world is hell. They don't have to wait for it until after they die. They're living it now.

I would argue that for the families of those students murdered at Santa Fe High School in Texas this week, and for the families of the Parkland Florida victims, and Newtown Connecticut and Columbine Highschool and a hundred other places where innocent children were murdered, life is very hellish right now.

And for those who suffer in Syria as a decidedly uncivil war rages around them, struggling for necessities, desperate for medical supplies, praying for an end to the ravages of war, life is very hellish right now.

And for the poor and those who work multiple jobs to provide for their families and who face a society that condemns them for not working harder; for those who so desperately need a hand up but who are chastised and accused of idly seeking a hand out, life can be pretty hellish right now.

For people all over the world who suffer from dreadful diseases (I read this week that Ebola, a disease which carries a 90% fatality rate, has gained a new foothold in Central Africa); for those who endure persecution like the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar, forced from their homes, raped, murdered, oppressed; those who face starvation because of drought and war, who languish in refugee camps, for them life is very hellish right now.

For people who suffer addiction, whose lives are dominated by the search for another “fix,” who have lost jobs and family members and perhaps everything important to them, life is very hellish right now.

For people who are persecuted because of their sexual orientation or their skin color or their religion or their place of birth; for those who live under threat of violence in their own homes, for those who struggle every day just to survive even right here in our own community, life can seem pretty hellish right now.

And while I refuse to believe in a literal hell, I willingly acknowledge that life in this world, for many people, is its own hell. And the fires of those hells rage on. What hope has the world to stop them, to turn them back, and quench them? The fire of the Holy Spirit. Because sometimes the best approach is to fight fire with fire.

You see my father served in the US Forrest service for 20 some-odd years. And for all the fighting forest fires he did, he also lit quite a few of them.

The two things a fire needs to burn are fuel and oxygen. Starve a fire of one of those two or both, and you put it out. Forest fires are routinely battled by using fire breaks and setting what are called “back-fires.” A firebreak is a wide stretch of ground that is cleared of trees and underbrush so as to look like a dirt road. When the fire reaches this point, there is no fuel, so it stops and burns itself out.

But often, the fire fighters will set another smaller, controlled fire that starts at the fire break and burns back toward the existing fire. When they meet, there is no more fuel to burn, and the original fire is extinguished. Thus, fire defeats fire.

The Fire of the Holy Spirit has come upon us and the church and the world, not just to comfort us as with the presence of God in our midst, but to be a counter against the fires of hell that burn in the lives of people all over this world.

I remember reading a story once about a guy who tried to put out the eternal flame that burns at the base of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris... by sitting on it. He failed. Why? Because fire inspires one, not to sit quietly and idly by, but to move, quickly, and with purpose.

If you ask people “What is the most important day in the life of the church?”, many will say Christmas or Easter. But those days, while certainly significant, tend to remind us of God’s love and compassion and grace. They are comforting days. Pentecost is a day that challenges us to act.

And on this Pentecost Sunday, we remember the fire of the Holy Spirit and we are reminded that just as those tongues of Holy Fire touched those early disciples, they touch us too. And that Holy Fire burns within each of us who call on Jesus as Savior and who worship the God who made us and loves us and desires what is best for us. And that fire burns against the fires of hell, and as She burns within us, we should be inspired to move too, quickly and with purpose.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Genesis 1:1-2, RSV

² Genesis 41:38, NRSV

³ Numbers 27:18, NRSV

⁴ Judges 13:25, NRSV

⁵ Judges 14:6 & 19, 15:14, NRSV

⁶ Isaiah 11:1-2, NRSV

⁷ Matthew 28:19-20, NRSV

⁸ Martin, Gary. "‘Fight Fire with Fire’ - the Meaning and Origin of This Phrase." *The Phrase Finder*, Gary Martin, www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/fight-fire-with-fire.html.

⁹ De Palma, Bran, director. *The Untouchables*. Performance by Kevin Costner, et al., Paramount Pictures, 1987.

¹⁰ Bell, Rob. *Love Wins*. HarperOne, 2011.

¹¹ Guthrie, Shirlye. *Christian Doctrine*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, p. 396.