

Let us Be that Church!  
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Acts 2  
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In the middle of the street I stood... dumbfounded! In front of me, past the snaking fire hoses and scurrying feet, stood a stately Victorian home, engulfed in flames. Three jets of water were trained on the gaping hole in the roof where flames shot up toward the sky. Thousands of gallons of water hit their mark with little or no effect. The power and tenacity of that inferno was hard for me to comprehend. I will never forget it!

Yes, fire can destroy, can take lives and displace communities. It can pull down mighty structures and disfigure what was once beautiful and pure. It can be, and frequently is, very destructive.

But, fire is also a creative force. In the heat of the furnace, painted clay is transformed into shimmering pottery; iron, twisted into elegant art; and sand transformed into molten glass of every possible hue, delighting the eye.

In a forest, fire actually helps some trees to grow. Certain cones of pine trees need the intense heat of a fire to open up and release their seeds. No fire, no seedlings. In the words of UCC preacher Julian DeShazier, "There are some things that can only reach their true potential by going through the fire."

As my friend the Rev Alison Buttrick Patton put it, "This is truth that makes us tremble. It is neither warm nor fuzzy, but no truth worth its salt comes without an edge. The fact is: as Christians, we cannot escape fire. It dances across the pages of our Holy Scripture, harrowing reminder that God is in the house. It leapt in the sun and the stars at the dawn of creation. It blazed in a bush it did not consume, as Moses stood barefoot in God's Holy Presence. God led the Israelites through the wilderness, in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the Glory of God 'like gleaming amber, enclosed by fire all around.' In the letter to the Hebrews, God is a 'consuming fire.'"

"These are awesome images—as in: they can fill us with awe, make us quake, or maybe even fear for our lives. Unless you consider the pottery, the glass, the pinecone. Then, perhaps, another possibility takes hold: that the fierce and fiery Spirit of God is bent not on consuming but on refining and reforming us; with the concentrated skill of an Artist, God gathers us up and infuses us with light and life."

"So those disciples, heads still spinning after their encounter with the risen Christ, found themselves swept off their feet by a furious wind that threw wide the shutters and rushed into the room. The wind brought with it divided tongues, as of fire which ignited and alighted on each brow, marking the disciples as teachers, preachers, and founders of Christ's Church. Touched by that holy fire, the disciples found themselves cracked open like seedpods, and the Good News of God's acts of power poured out of them, so that they could not contain themselves. They spoke to all who would listen, in every language, so that everyone understood—and the people were amazed and perplexed; and somehow transformed."

That's why we talk of fire on this Pentecost Sunday. It is because something powerful happens when the fire and passion of the Holy Spirit comes calling. It is because on Pentecost, the Spirit of God drew from the forge an unexpected mix of common folks: Galileans, Parthians and Medes and crafted them into something stunning; a community infused with light and life. Keep reading to the end of chapter 2, and you'll see what that looks like in every-day terms.

Verse 44 says that, “All who believed were together and had all things in common...” (Acts 2:44). They prayed together, broke bread with glad and generous hearts, and shared what they had with those in need. In other words—that early Jesus movement radiated with all the good stuff that God gives: love, generosity, gratitude and wonder.

Love, generosity, gratitude and wonder. Those are the signs of the Spirit’s handiwork, signs of a Church on Fire.

Now, to be sure, a Church on Fire is intimate with suffering and sorrow, but is not consumed by them. It knows that God does not leave us standing in the cinders. God always has something magnificent in store, an eruption of new life, like so many wildflowers springing up out of the deadwood on the forest floor. Knowing this gives the Church courage—to confront human greed, root out injustice, take creative risks, and speak truth to power. We can do this, because we know God is not bent on our destruction. Death is not the end of it. On the contrary: the Holy Spirit is at work in the heat of the forge; burning away some stuff, so that the new gifts of remarkable beauty can shine through.

On our lobby wall just outside our Sanctuary is a burnt wooden cross bearing testimony to this hope from the fire that burned our chapel some 30 years ago.

That cross bears witness that Church on Fire is also luminescent: It refracts God’s Spirit, lets the love shine through. It is slow to anger and quick to forgive, because we have been forgiven. Knowing that, gives the Church grace.

A Church on Fire is open, malleable, trusting God to shape it. It is never quite finished; over time it will be reworked, reformed, renewed. And that’s the beauty of it.

A Church on Fire is constantly planting seeds so new life can take root. We talk about the need to attract folks, but really, we are called to go out and seed the gospel, to tell the story of God’s love and forgiveness, to spread hope and gratitude and wonder. THAT’S what it means to be a church forged by the hand of the Holy Spirit: a church infused with light and life.

This morning, we are continuing a Pentecost journey of faith and hope started one year ago. Today’s bulletin insert provides a reflection of the amazing path we have traveled for the past 12 months. It is an inspiring story!

The power and the passion of this ministry initiative had its beginning when we opened our hearts to the guiding Spirit in the fall of 2014. I will never forget it! We caught wind of an inspiring vision, and that fire and passion have been faithfully nurtured by our dedicated Housing Initiative task force and made real through your faithful and generous support! Thank you!

Now, our goal is to make a significant investment in supporting two very vulnerable populations in our community—youth and women. These new community collaborations reflect the values of the Housing Initiative to partner with our larger community to respond with faithfulness to the suffering of our neighbors who are without shelter.

The need is great! We know for example that several hundred youth, still attending school, no longer feel safe or accepted in their homes, and we know that the sooner we can help them get off the street and into shelter the better.

This we know because within 72 hours being on the street, 1 in 3 homeless youth are approached by human traffickers. A young person who has been on the streets past the 15<sup>th</sup> night has an 80% chance of becoming chronically homeless.

80%!

Friends, on this Pentecost Sunday as we put our faith into action again let us celebrate that we are the church fired up by love, generosity, gratitude and wonder. We are the church fired up by justice; fired up by hope; fired up by a vision of God's beloved community that is opened-hearted, generous, forgiving and joyful!

We are the church that refracts the Spirit of God—when congregation and choir lift our voices in song; when the children and youth lead us in worship; when we light candles and pray together; when we cook breakfast and serve it to our neighbors who make their home where they can; when we give rides to folks who can't make their own way to God's House; when we gather at the bedside knowing our presence will be enough; when we bless backpacks and special offerings; when we break bread and share it; when we write letters to congress and notes of encouragement to each other; when we join forces with other communities of faith to build a home for a wonderful, dear family.

When we let our light so shine... We ARE a Church on Fire: not just a collection of faithful who seek a common thread, but a church that knows and reflects the life-renewing, positive, passionate fire in the Heart of God.

May we be that church! Let us pray...

Spirit God,  
blow into our lives,  
inspire us,  
move us to action,  
break down the walls that separate us.  
Where our language divides, offer us translation.  
Where our fear overcomes, fill us with the fire of courage.  
Where our lives are becalmed, fill our sails with wind,  
moving us forward into bright and peace-filled future.  
Fill us with the hope and promise of Pentecost!  
Amen.