

St James United Church

Message for May 28, 2023

Pentecost Sunday (Last Sunday of Easter)

"Wind and Fire"

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-13



Wind and fire. These are the elements we most associate with the feast of Pentecost, but they aren't what we want to think about this year, not when our siblings out West, especially in Alberta, have been so impacted by these elements combining together into devastating wildfires. Thankfully recent rain on the Prairies has helped to bring some wildfires under control. A shame that the Pentecostal experience wasn't described as raindrops falling in peaceful calm.

Of course, that isn't how it is described and so we need to grapple with this story about wind and fire. As I did so, I found myself looking again at the video we showed last week about prescribed burning. The presenter made a statement that caught my attention. She spoke of cultural burning as a way to not only help prevent uncontrolled wildfires by removing dry brush, but to encourage biodiversity and increase food like berries, in other words to help life flourish and grow. Plants in a boreal forest have evolved with fire. Fire enriches soil, breaks open seed pods of pines so they can germinate, and thins the canopy so light can get in and help saplings grow. Wind is similarly beneficial. It blows around pollen, increasing genetic diversity, when trees are blown over, they feed the soil, and again with more sunlight getting through, saplings and other plants, can grow.

In this context, wind and fire are symbols of growth and renewal. And this is what we experience in our reading from the second chapter of Acts. Consider what happens as these elements come and a crowd is drawn to the sound. It wasn't the noise of the wind so much as the sound of hundreds of Jesus' followers all talking at once that drew them. Everyone was amazed at how they understood their message about Jesus despite all the different languages they spoke. You may recall from what I said last year how the places people were from included traditional enemies of the Jewish people and those beyond the Roman Empire. The Spirit helps clear the underbrush of historical bias and distrust between people in order to bring a healing in as well as a widening of relationships.

A big part of this is the openness in their communication, so that the people could hear what was said, listening with a desire to know and not based on prior assumptions about the one speaking. We get a sense of this as they say, "Aren't all of these who are speaking Galileans?" Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city. There were people living there, as well as visiting, from all

over the empire and beyond. On the other hand, Galilee was rural, the people from there judged as hicks. But as we discovered, the Spirit shifts the script, the significance of which is given later in the story as Peter says that what they were experiencing was a fulfilling of Joel's prophecy. Joel says the Spirit will be poured out on women along with men, youths as well as elders, and that enslaved people will speak God's truth. The widening of relationships is rooted in justice, in liberation as those without power in society are given it through God's blessing.

All this is possible because of Pentecost, and not just from a Christian view. A belief in this originally Jewish festival that celebrates God giving Torah to the people is that before that day the spiritual and physical didn't mix. But whether it was at Sinai or there in Jerusalem, or right now in this sanctuary, God comes and thins the canopy. God wants to bless us, and not just the favoured ones. With sunlight illuminating the forest floor, everything flourishes. I'm glad we strive to live out this universality of God's blessing at St. James and do so in some very concrete ways. As you know, we try to have space in each bulletin for people to write things down if they wish. This is because people listen in different ways. Some people need to keep their hands busy, like knitting or doing cross stitch, while others like to take notes, both ways to help focus. It is why we created a family space so children can be here in worship with everyone but in a way that is meaningful for them. Likewise, we have large print bulletins, hearing assists, a microphone available on the main level for readers and those leading prayers. Maybe one day we'll have a lift into the chancel. These are some of the ways we participate in what God is doing, reaching out in love and blessing to everyone without exception, creating space so that everyone can flourish and grow.

Pentecost celebrates the joining of God and us, God wanting to make the earth God's dwelling place, God wanting each of us to be a holy dwelling place as well. This is one meaning of the sacrament of communion. In this meal, God joins with us, Christ becomes part of us. It was in the evening when people share a meal that the Risen Christ appeared, and there he breathed on the disciples, a gifting of the Spirit that animated them with divine power. This is a gift he keeps giving, sharing wisdom, courage, compassion, spiritual understanding, wonder, a hunger for justice, love. We named these gifts in our call to worship. They're shining before us. More importantly they are burning within us. I hope you can feel them in you. They're given to everyone equally, God blessing all of us, not in spite of, but through our differences, making them the ways we live out God's gifts in our lives. These are given to strengthen us, renew our hearts, help us grow. And to empower us to go into the community to widen God's circle of relationships still further.

Wind and fire. These are the elements of Pentecost, given as a source of renewal, of growth, of blessing. Received in the word, experienced through communion, shared in community, may we harness these gifts in service of God's loving reign, sent out to encourage, to liberate, to bring new life to all. Amen.