

2023 05 21 – Wind & Flame

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21 (The Inclusive Bible)

On Friday, the top CBC news story began:

As Alberta's wildfire crisis drags on, the return of hot weather in the days ahead threatens to escalate the danger in communities under threat.

Intense wildfires continue to burn across the province, forcing thousands of Albertans from their homes and leaving communities, both near and far from the flames, cloaked with smoke.

"We will all be on high alert this weekend," Christie Tucker, information unit manager with Alberta Wildfire, said Friday.

Tucker said dry conditions, gusty winds and temperatures 10 degrees above seasonal will have firefighters on the lookout for new wildfires.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-wildfire-news-conference-1.6849498>

Wind and flame, they threaten the forests in the northern parts of Alberta, BC and Saskatchewan. Here, in Swift Current, our lungs are being filled with smoke that has travelled hundreds of miles to reach this southern-most part of our province.

We don't need to imagine the story of Pentecost. We're living it. We may not be speaking in strange languages, but we know better than most the sound of "a violent rushing wind from heaven." We have all seen tongues of fire rising from campfires, grassfires, or even the forest fires shown on the news every night for the last couple of weeks. Wind and flame, they have so much power, they can cause so much pain and destruction.

And yet they are also symbols that represent the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Love and Compassion, the Spirit of Truth and Justice. Wind also comes as a gentle, refreshing breeze on a warm summer day. It is the movement of air every time we breathe, it is, in fact, the breath of life. Fire is the warmth of a hearth on a cool spring evening. It is the energy that lights our homes and fills our hearts. Wind and flame can also represent the comforting, protecting, energizing, life-giving power of the Spirit of Love, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being.

On that day of Pentecost, nearly 2000 years ago, the disciples experienced the wind and the flame as the transforming power of God. Pentecost is often referred to as the birth day of the church. It was the day when the followers of Jesus went from being disciples or learners to being apostles or messengers. It was the day when they were inspired to preach the gospel throughout the world, to preach it, not just in Aramaic or Greek, but in all the languages known to humankind. They were called to preach the message that Jesus had shared with them. The message of the transforming, the life-giving power of the love of God.

Every year we celebrate this day and remind ourselves of the beginnings of the Christian Church. We fill our own church buildings with the colours of Pentecost, with blue and red, orange and yellow. Sometimes we even have streamers or balloons. It can be quite a party! There is lots of celebrate! The church has come a long way in 2000 years!

But it is important to remember that the day of Pentecost was not the end-goal, it was just the beginning. Those disciples, those apostles, went on to face struggle and persecution and some even died as martyrs. Yes, they preached and thousands responded, but not without a cost. In some ways the wind and the flame of the Holy Spirit caused more problems for those early followers of Jesus, than it solved. The wind and the flame were both destructive and life-giving.

But that is the reality of our lives, isn't it? Knowing that we are called to a task, knowing that it is our work to do, doesn't make it easy. Think of all the times in your lives when you started something new: a new job, a marriage, the birth of a child, a new project, a hobby, or even an organization. Think of the excitement, the joy, the fear and the uncertainty. We can know with all our hearts that this is our calling and still be terrified of what lies ahead.

I read this week the story of a man called Paul Farmer who followed his calling as it took him to places in turmoil all over the world. Here is his story as shared by a Lutheran pastor, David Lose:

In Tracy Kidder's biography of Dr. Paul Farmer, he shares the story of one of the world's truly remarkable persons, a doctor who had every single reason in the world to enjoy a profitable and meaningful medical practice in the United States yet who was so convicted by the need to address the world's most intractable infectious diseases that he spent his life in remote parts of the world striving to bring a measure of health to the globe's poorest citizens... Laboring in Haiti, Peru, Cuba, Russia, and more, Dr.

Farmer has often been hailed as a “wonder worker.” But the truth is that he simply did not give up but persisted, always seeing after some measure of success another challenge and possibility. And so when Kidder titled his book, he chose a Haitian proverb that guided Farmer and captures the wisdom that, in this life and world, when you solve one problem, there is always another one waiting for you. The book is called Mountains Beyond Mountains. <https://www.davidlose.net/2018/05/pentecost-b-2018-pentecost-possibilities/>

Yes, like the wind and the flame, the Spirit calls, it energizes us and comforts us but it doesn't solve our problems for us. It doesn't promise an easy road. Instead, the Spirit takes us into difficult places and reminds us that sometimes there is pain and even death before new life is possible. Sometimes the wind and flame burn and tear down in order to make room for that which is new. Sometimes we get one fire put out and another appears in its place.

The Holy Spirit, the Ground of our Being, doesn't solve our problems for us. Instead it opens our eyes and invites us to see the possibilities we would not have seen otherwise. We all know that forest fires are a natural part of God's creation. There are even trees like the Jack Pine and Lodgepole Pine that have cones protected by a waxy coating that require the heat of fire to release their seeds. Sometimes the wind and the flame create new environments that allow for a different type of creative growth.

On this Pentecost Sunday, let us celebrate and give thanks not only for the warmth and the comfort that the Spirit brings us, but also for the wind and the flame that challenge us and force us to consider new possibilities and new ways of being in this world. May it be so. Amen.