

The Day of Pentecost  
May 15, 2016  
Trinity Parish, Seattle

Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” (Acts 2:1-2)

Violent wind, and tongues of fire. Wind and fire are a dangerous combination, as we have witnessed these past two weeks in the Fort McMurray area up in Alberta, Canada. Veteran firefighters said they had never witnessed anything like it before – impossible to contain. We know from our own experience in eastern Washington just this past summer how devastating a combination it can be.

But here we have it, right in the Book of Acts, on the day the church was born.

Wind and fire and the dangers they imply may seem like an unlikely and even unwelcome image for the birth of the church. But that may be because our understanding of the church has become far too tame, far too domesticated, and far too removed from what it meant for those first disciples who on this day were filled with the Holy Spirit and with fire!

Oh yes, we’ve all seen birthday cakes at Pentecost as we celebrate the birthday of the church, with candles lit and big breaths of air to blow them out! And that is just about as close as we usually get to the wind and fire of Pentecost. I think John the Baptist had something else in mind when he said, “I baptize you with water, but the one who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

And long before John the Baptist, the psalmist had said, “You make the winds your messengers and flames of fire your servants.” (Psalm 104:4) And the words

of our antiphon for Psalm 104 today, “Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth.”

Where is the fire today? Where are the signs of the Holy Spirit renewing the face of the earth, and making all things new? How does the church lay claim to this gift, and actually live into its call to change the world?

We’ve grown accustomed to hearing the surveys and stories of decline in the church. Pew Research studies and denominational statistics continue to pour out the numbers, and they are not encouraging – if you’re measuring by the numbers. In poll after poll, the fastest growing religious identity in our country is “None” – and that is not n-u-n, it’s n-o-n-e.

Jim Friedrich is an Episcopal blogger who lives here in the Seattle area. In a recent post, he asks,

Does institutional Christianity have a future? We have certainly heard the dismal narratives of decline. Churches and seminaries are closing, congregations are aging, and budgets are shrinking, while the unaffiliated— “Nones” and “Dones”— are on the rise. There are still many pockets of vitality— thriving, growing, committed churches— but their long-term sustainability remains a serious question in the unsupportive habitat of postmodernity.

How many Christian bodies, at either the local or the denominational level, have resigned themselves to a diminished role as complacent and compliant chaplains to the dominant culture, or as harmless historical societies dedicated to the preservation of endangered practices and memories? An English priest of the last century, Alan Ecclestone, warned that such abdication of its changemaking mission would produce a “miserly and unexpectant” church.

Thankfully [Jim Friedrich writes], we have antidotes for such a fate: resurrection and the Holy Spirit. Resurrection transforms death into rebirth; the Holy Spirit makes all things new. The Book of Common Prayer describes this potency with elegant brevity: “things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jimfriedrich.com/2016/04/26/changemaking-churches-and-the-transformation-of-neighborhoods/>

Jim and I were both present at the recent Inhabit Conference here in Seattle at The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, where there was an abundance of hope, and seemingly endless testimonies to life being made new.

For two days, Christian changemakers shared stories about doing and being “church” in new ways and new places. Even though many of the speakers do ministry in the lusterless environs of makeshift buildings and impoverished neighborhoods, their stories glowed with resurrection light.

Strangers sharing nothing but a zip code become friends over soup suppers. A trashy vacant lot is transformed into a beautiful park or neighborhood garden. Economic wastelands bloom as social entrepreneurs are raised up locally. The hungry and homeless become neighbors-in-need rather than faceless problems. The powerless organize to make their voices heard in civic planning and development. Police and residents defuse tensions and break stereotypes by socializing together. “Low-status neighborhoods” are redeemed by the work of many hands, becoming places of human flourishing. Such things don’t always happen, but when they do, the Kingdom of God draws near, and the church of God rises from the dead.<sup>2</sup>

Jim goes on to describe the Inhabit conference presenters, many of them in their twenties and thirties – people who have

...committed themselves to simplified and generous lifestyles as residents of the struggling communities they serve. Their ‘churches’ tend to be improvisational— living rooms, storefronts, neighborhood centers, local watering holes, and street corners. If any of their ministries employ a traditional church space, it is usually where the old congregation has been on the verge of extinction.

These youthful pastors understand “parish” in its original sense— designating a whole neighborhood rather than simply the church situated within it. Their ministry is dedicated not to their faith community alone, but to the flourishing of their whole geographical parish. Don’t just feed the hungry; get to know them by breaking bread together. Don’t just serve the poor; help them get the skills and opportunities they need. Don’t just care about people, but work with

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

them to challenge and change the forces which impact their lives. Organize for parks and housing. Educate. Demand justice. Reclaim the commons. Foster hope. Develop local economies. Lift up social entrepreneurs. Build equity. Break barriers. Nurture relationships. Network solutions. Innovate. Improvise. Advocate, organize, include, connect, encourage and empower. Be Jesus for others. Imagine.

We heard powerful stories of entrepreneurial churches doing all these things, changing neighborhoods and social structures and the lives of the people in them. There was much in the Inhabit experience that speaks to us right here and right now – here at Trinity, in this neighborhood, this parish, at this time.

Trinity has been insulated from the broader narrative of decline to some degree by an endowment that has helped us mask the reality of aging and expensive buildings, and propped us up when the income didn't match the expenses. We're working hard now to deal with that deeper reality, to honestly face the long term trajectory we are on, and to take action to turn it around and place ourselves on a new footing.

But trading in old buildings for a new one will not by itself make us a more effective church, a more thriving or enduring church. What will finally make us truly the church is when we have embraced the danger, the wind and the fire of God's Spirit, to fill us, and to empower us to work for the transformation of our community, our neighborhood, and the lives of people in it. Anything less is not the church.

Today and every Pentecost, we are reminded of our baptism – a baptism by water, yes, but also a baptism by fire. In baptism we are joined with Christ in his life, death, and resurrection. Our baptismal liturgy also contains an anointing with chrism, a fragrant oil, and as we pour it on the head of the newly baptized, we say, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."

In just a few minutes we'll be baptizing Neil Anton Doherty IV. He's too young to know what is happening to him here today, but his parents have brought him here, convinced that this is a way of life that they desire for their son. And it is a way of life. It is the way of radical love, transforming love, love that calls us to live no longer for self alone, but for the sake of the world Christ came to save.

Three others of our members will go this evening to receive the laying on of the hands of our bishop, confirming them and calling down the Holy Spirit to strengthen them and empower them for service.

That's what happened to those first disciples on that first Day of Pentecost. They were not just being given the assurance of salvation, or being initiated into a tribe. They were being given gifts to go and make disciples throughout the world, to break down the barriers of tribe and language, and to change the world.

And that's something that should both excite us and scare us silly!

Rudolf Otto wrote a study of Christian mysticism titled *The Idea of the Holy*. In it he describes both the sense of awe and the sense of dread one experiences when encountering the numinous. "Like wind and fire in nature provoking situations of danger or comfort, wind and fire in scripture symbolize Divine Presence evoking awe, terror, and fascination."

Suzanne Guthrie writes from a mystical perspective, and says that

In mystical progression, Pentecost is the analog for the union of the soul with God. I think it is impossible to approach Pentecost without a sense of dread. The conferring of the Holy Spirit is the same motion as the commissioning as Apostles. We are "sent" to the "ends of the earth" as bearers of Good News. But Good News is real change, and change is dangerous, and often not received well, as tradition [and our own experience so amply] illustrates.<sup>3</sup>

So, whether you come to this Pentecost moment with a sense of dread, or fear, or awe, or anticipation and excitement, know that the wind and fire of God's Spirit will change us, and will empower us to do things we could not imagine, and through us will continue God's persistent and sometimes painful process of renewing the face of the earth.

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<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Guthrie, *The Edge of the Enclosure* (<http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/pentecostabc.html>)