

FIRE SEASON

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

John 7:37-39
Acts 2:1-21

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Just last year, in 2017, we experienced one of the worst wildfire seasons and the most expensive firefighting season in the history of our country. This particular picture was taken in Oregon. A little south in the state of California, an area the size of the entire state of Delaware burned. We have yet to see how this year's wildfire season will unfold, but one thing we can be certain about right now is that highly trained individuals called hotshots are already preparing for this year's wildfires. If you didn't know, hotshots is the name given to the select firefighters who specialize in wildfires. These specialized firefighters work in crews and their work is physically demanding, emotionally taxing, and very dangerous.

These hotshots operate out of the very basic understanding that wildfires are bad. Certainly, most of us would agree with this understanding. After all, characters such as Smokey the Bear and even Bambi have ingrained into our brains the unforgettable message that wildfires are a very dangerous enemy, and therefore must be battled with everything we've got. However, there are those who think differently; they say that our on-going efforts to control such fires are contrary to nature. In fact, they say our well-intentioned efforts are actually disrupting God's naturally established order. Before we humans intervened, ground fires that were often ignited by lightning would clear forest floors of accumulating leaves, branches and needles every five to 25 years. These ecological friendly fires would swiftly sweep across the forest floor, taking care of the debris and yet mostly leaving large trees intact with room to grow. Scientists also tell us that there are certain plants that need fire to grow and thrive, and so the fighting of wildfires has actually interrupted the organic cycles of those plants.

Of course, farmers have known for centuries the benefits of burning fields. In fact, nowadays farmers often have to do what nature used to do. For example, in Eastern Maine it is well known that occasionally burning blueberry fields is the best way to improve the crop. So, farmers ride on high-wheeled tractors with mounted propane jets that shoot out flames in order to blacken their fields. Burning fields not only helps sanitize them from unwanted weeds, it also produces fertilizers and it strengthens root systems. And of course, stronger roots ultimately lead to stronger plants and better fruit. Could it be that our years of fighting wildfires have actually impeded the natural balance and growth of wild vegetation?

Just like some farmers and ecologists have always known that fire can be good for plants and good for the soil, our scripture lesson from Acts 2 shows us that an occasional and divinely inspired fire is actually good for Christians as well. It was right before Jesus left his disciples by ascending into heaven that he told them they would be "clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:49) Jesus told them to go to Jerusalem and to wait for the Holy Spirit to come to them. So that's what they did - they went and they waited and they prayed for God's help to arrive.

The twelve disciples, including the recently chosen Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot, and several other followers were together in one place. They were actually just one small group of Jews among thousands of other Jews who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Pentecost. Pentecost was a long established festival that celebrated both the giving of the Law to Moses and the gathering of the

harvest. We know, of course, that the followers of Jesus were not simply in Jerusalem to participate in the typical Pentecost festivities of that day, they were there watching and waiting and praying for the heavenly power just like Jesus had told them to do.

It was about 9:00 in the morning, and suddenly it happened! The Spirit of God not only descended like Jesus had promised and rested upon the disciples; it actually got inside them. The Spirit entered their hearts; it saturated their souls. The unleashing of this power caused sparks to fly. Acts chapter 2 describes it in this way, "Divided tongues as of fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each one of them." (Acts 2:3) It's as if they were on fire – not physically, of course, but spiritually – and it was very noticeable.

These flames were seen and prophetic speaking in their native tongue was heard by people of various nationalities who had come to Jerusalem to enjoy the festivities of Pentecost. Those people responded with a mixture of emotions – confusion, fear, curiosity, and even criticism. But then something even more amazing happened. Those flames began to fan out and spread from the couple dozen or so disciples and followers of Jesus to others. Soon, the flames were nothing less than a full-fledged wildfire. Like all fires, there was evidence of destruction as the fire actually choked out confusion, destroyed fear, and silenced criticism. But the positive "after affects" of the fire were also clear as faith was strengthened, hope and courage were found, and new and abundant life began to flourish. The Church was born amidst the power of those spiritual flames.

Could it be that some powerfully transforming fire is exactly what we gathered followers of Jesus Christ need today, here in this place? Like those first disciples, we may be committed to Jesus Christ, but without the power of God even committed Christians are not going to bear the fruit that God intends us to bear. Trying to be a Christian without the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives works about as well as a car without gas. We all know that it doesn't matter how much gas is in the tanks at the gas station, because we are not going anywhere if there is no gas in our own tank. We Christians are simply not going anywhere unless the Holy Spirit is empowering us.

For those of us who have been followers of Christ for a while, this Holy Spirit fire is bound to shake us up a bit and renew our enthusiasm. After all, it's not unusual for the joy and passion of faith to fade over time. It's not that the relationship has ceased to exist, in some ways it might even be deeper, but passion has a way of slipping away. When that happens, it's not unusual to fall into comfortable and even lazy patterns in the living out of our faith. We end up closing ourselves off from the God's Spirit, because we may not actually want to stir things up; we don't really want a fire lit within us. We don't want challenges outside our normal routine and comfort zone; we don't want Jesus calling us to follow him somewhere over there when we want to remain right here.

But when the Holy Spirit comes things simply cannot remain the same any more than an actual fire allows things to remain the same. I've read that landscapes deprived of fire often go through rather dramatic changes. Once grassy clearings can become closed up with trees. Swamps can become filled in with vegetation and dry up. The open area under the tree canopy can become clogged with a thick mass of vegetation. Well, our souls can also become closed up, dried up and clogged. But we don't have to stay that way, because God's Spirit removes the debris that hinders the growth of faith. God's Spirit strengthens the root system of our faith, and it even produces fertilizer in the form of loving acts and words of witness.

Periodically, the weeds of fear and doubt and self-centeredness just need to be burned away or they will choke out our Christian passion and our willingness for

action. It is God's Spirit that removes the undergrowth and debris of our lives and allows new life to grow. It renews our souls, sets ablaze our hope, and heightens our passion for worship and service. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that keeps us strong and healthy as individual Christians and as the church of Jesus Christ.

Today, we are once again reminded that the Holy Spirit overcame fear and inactivity to birth a movement of Christ followers called the Church. That movement has certainly faced many obstacles and dangers over the past two thousand years, and yet it has spread to the very ends of the earth.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we are encouraged to feel the heat and to allow the presence of the Holy Spirit to unsettle us. And instead of being hotshots who take very seriously the job of putting out fires, we are challenged to enthusiastically embrace the task of setting a few fires around here. Not literally, of course, but spiritually.

So instead of God's fire being something we fear and avoid, let us pray for it, receive it, embrace it and experience it as something that is cleansing, healthy and energizing for our soul. May the fire of God's Spirit burn within you and through you to the glory of God and for the purpose of building up the Church of Jesus Christ. Amen.