



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Catching Fire”

Acts 2:1-21

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On Thursday, on the big island of Hawaii, the Kilauea volcano erupted. The ash plume reached cruising altitude—30,000 feet. Kilauea is one of the earth’s most active volcanoes. It has triggered earthquakes, created fissures, and released flows of lava that have destroyed dozens of homes.

There is no stopping this volcanic activity, no timetable and no resolution in sight. Geologists warn locals to brace for explosions in days and weeks ahead. One commentator notes that the color of the magma coming out of the fissures is so orange it looks fake. I watched the video, and I agree. That orange magma reminds me of Pentecost—divided tongues of fire.¹

Earlier this month I met with a group of you to talk about our morning lesson. I asked what Pentecost means to you, what difference it makes in your lives. Your answers are revealing.

One person says, “It is really confusing. I don’t get it. Wasn’t God’s Spirit already around?” (A simple response to that is “Yes.” A complex response is “Yes, and...”) Another adds, “It sounds like it is a story for somebody else, not for me.” Another describes his gut reaction; he recoils. He finds the word Pentecost to be too close to the word Pentecostal. He voices distrust for individuals and groups that seize or abuse power. Then someone says, “I’m not sure what the details mean, but I think the point of Pentecost is that God fulfills God’s promises.” Yes—good. But that’s also the problem, isn’t it? Pentecost is about God keeping promises, in a way that comes across as unbelievable.

Some of us may feel the same way about jazz that we do about Pentecost. A little uncomfortable. It may stray a bit too far from our experience.

Broad Street, you pan Pentecost! At best, you give it an ambivalent review. We ministers, we like Pentecost. We get to wear red and celebrate the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is a Christian educator’s dream. Today Brittany is in her happy place. Wind, fire, noise, languages. It lends itself to props—it’s tactile and tangible. Today our Pentecost iGen (intergenerational) event featured a fire pit, kites and pinwheels. Something I love about Broad Street is that even if Pentecost hasn’t ignited you personally, if we ask you, you’ll wear red!

Christian tradition claims that something incendiary happens on Pentecost. The disciples become a mini United Nations with the world’s first simultaneous translation. Pentecost was and is puzzling. Wind, fire and a linguistic miracle. It sounds like fake news. Then we discover that our scripture passage voices our question: “What does this mean?”

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/17/us/eruption-volcano-hawaii-kilauea.html>

Pentecost signals a seismic shift. Fearful disciples act boldly. People speak the languages of strangers. Peter preaches a sermon from the prophet Joel that suggests the world will no longer be the same. Pentecost is how the early church describes the transformation of hesitant disciples into risk-taking leaders. How long this takes and how it actually happens is lost to us. That it happens is not. We don't have to take Pentecost literally in order to take it seriously. The Easter season ends today, with wind and fire. Pentecost sings Easter's song, and amplifies and personalizes it into all times and all places. Today the Spirit sings Easter's song—bigger and hotter.

The disciples have had an experience beyond words. Think about an experience that changed your life. How would you describe falling in love? Or becoming a parent or a grandparent? Or facing mortality? We use metaphors and similes to tell about it. That's what our writer does.

...suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind...

Wind is an image we all recognize. We know the difference between a gentle breeze and a Chicago gale. A violent wind can uproot and destroy. A soft puff of air can caress and calm. Wind describes a power we cannot control.

The early church chooses another image, one no one recognizes.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appear among them, and a tongue rests on each of them.

Super strange. Until I learned about an image on first century Roman coins. Caesar's head is on these coins. Divided tongues of fire appear above his head. The coins proclaim, "Caesar is the Son of God." The tongues of fire signify power and authority, royalty, divinity.²

Pentecost takes a familiar image and repurposes it. Recent scholarship notes how the New Testament regularly resists the Roman Empire. In the first century, everyone lived under the fearsome power of Caesar. These first Christians make an extraordinary claim: that their small band of growing followers is more deeply connected to God's real power and authority than Caesar. The tongues of fire make Pentecost the coronation of the church over Caesar.

We live in a time when some of our Caesars think they are god. None of us is immune from allowing them to be our gods. Divided tongues of fire proclaim we worship God alone, not Caesar. Pentecost births the church as people catch fire. Person by person, the church grows big, and public, and urban, and gets hotter and hotter.

Pentecost isn't discreet or subtle. It's forceful—a roar, a ruckus. Yesterday morning we watched the royal wedding. The British royal family doesn't like a ruckus. They are a polite group, attentive to manners and decorum. And so are we. We don't just drop by. We wait for invitations. Pentecost doesn't wait. It disrupts decorum and violates manners. It reminds us that the Spirit isn't always a still small voice or a faint stirring of the heart. God's Spirit isn't always subtle or even polite. On Pentecost, we encounter a God we cannot control. This God alters the landscape and re-landscapes our altars. Pentecost sings Easter's song. We catch fire together. Broad Street, you are getting hotter.

The Holy Spirit doesn't promise to solve our problems or remove our fear. But when we see possibilities we would not otherwise see, when we discover courage to move forward, that may be the Spirit. I'd venture to say

² Dr. Herman Waetjen, lecture on Acts 2, given at San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1998.

it was the Spirit who propelled Ed Toney to pursue baptism after 35 years of sitting in Broad Street's pews. The Spirit, who bugged, hassled, hounded and drew him toward the font.

Our job isn't to capture or define this Spirit, our job is simply to affirm that the Spirit *is* and open our hearts to God's mysterious windy, fiery presence, in the world, in us, and among us. The Spirit doesn't promise safety. Rather than remove us from turbulence, or even settle it, the Spirit enables us to keep our footing amid life's tremors. The Spirit is God working in us to accomplish what God expects of us.³

I share a musical example of the presence of the Holy Spirit, from back in 1972. Two years before Duke Ellington died, Yale University held a gathering of leading black jazz musicians in order to raise money for a department of African-American music. Aside from Ellington, the musicians who came for three days of concerts, jam sessions, and workshops included Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Mary Lou Williams, and Willie (the Lion) Smith. During a performance by a Gillespie-led sextet, someone, evidently unhappy with this presence on campus, called in a bomb threat.

The police attempted to clear the building, but Charles Mingus refused to leave. He urged the officers to get all the others out, but adamantly remained onstage with his bass. He was heard telling the police captain, "Racism planted that bomb, but racism ain't strong enough to kill this music. If I'm going to die, I'm ready. But I'm going out playing 'Sophisticated Lady'."

Once outside, Gillespie and his group set up again. But coming from inside was the sound of Mingus intently playing Ellington's dreamy thirties hit, which that day became a protest song, as the performance just kept going on and on and getting hotter. In the street, Ellington stood in the waiting crowd just beyond the theatre's open doors smiling—as Mingus filled the space with passion and protest and hope and life.⁴

Pentecost keeps playing the song of Easter, with passion and protest and joy... so others can catch fire, so that it just keeps going on and on, getting hotter and hotter. Amen.

³ David Lose, *In the Meantime*, Pentecost B 2018: Pentecost Possibilities.

⁴ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Black, Brown, and Beige: Duke Ellington's Music and Race in America," *The New Yorker*, May 17, 2010. As cited in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2018, "What if Jesus Meant All This Stuff," by Mark Ramsey, pp 20-23.