

Hair on Fire

Over twenty years ago I served a congregation that started on fire in the middle of a cold January night in the Midwest. The building was a complete loss and, just like a global pandemic, it caused the congregation to have to make immediate decisions about how to do church in a new reality.

In the two-week period, right after the fire, eight members of our congregation died and we had no church building in which to hold the memorial services or funeral dinners. Other churches in town stepped up to let us use their sanctuaries and fellowship halls.

After one of those memorial services the local Lutheran Church allowed us to have the funeral dinner in their building. The Lutheran women, wanting to do something for the church that had just tragically lost their building, came to help us navigate the kitchen. They put tablecloths on the tables and decorated them with taper candles down the middle. Their church was smaller than ours had been and the extended family that gathered for the meal was large in numbers. Tables and chairs had to be placed close together to accommodate everyone.

After I blessed the meal, we lined up to fill our plates buffet style. I chose a seat and began conversing with the man across the table, the son of the person who died. He said, "How did the fire start?" The burning of our beloved building seemed to be the only conversation anyone wanted to have with me for months after the fire.

Just as I was getting ready to explain that the cause of the fire was a faulty booster water heater in the church kitchen, a couple standing at the end of the table said to me, "Susan, would you mind moving down one seat so we can scoot in beside you?" "I'd be glad to," I replied. But the tables were so close together that I couldn't move my chair back very far." To move, I leaned over the table and moved down one seat, all while continuing to answer the man across the table.

Several seconds later a man, on the other side of the room, yelled, "She's on fire." I turned around to see who he was pointing at. It wasn't until he ran over to our table, leaped over my tablemates and began to beat my head that I realized he was talking about me. Everyone's food was covered with burnt hair and I had bald spot on the top of my head for weeks.

When I got home and told my husband what had happened he said, "Lucy" which is what he always said when I explained my misadventures in pastoral ministry. "So basically," he said, "the man asked you how the fire started and you said, 'Here let me stick my hair in this flame and show you how fire starts.'"

Every time I hear the scripture from Acts 2 about Pentecost...about the Spirit showing up and placing tongues of flame on every head, I think of that man yelling, "She's on fire." I envision a sea of people with their hair on fire.

Maybe that is why I love this Sunday so much. It is a Sunday that displays the unpredictable, wild nature of the Spirit. Of all the liturgical high holy days, Pentecost is my favorite. It is

different from the rest. It hasn't been co-opted by consumerism. Greeting card companies aren't pushing Pentecost cards. Nobody says, "How did you celebrate Pentecost this year?" There are no cherished family recipes for your Pentecost dinner. Better Homes and Gardens doesn't have an issue brimming with ideas on how to decorate your Pentecost table. There is no candy in the shape of flames to tempt you at the checkout stand at the grocery store.

But at the La Verne Church of the Brethren we add some color to this day. As I mentioned earlier in this service, we have an artist in the church that spends hours putting up these fire colored peace cranes to symbolize the Spirit swooping into our sanctuary. We have a tradition of wearing red or other fire colors on Pentecost. Between fire colored peace cranes and wearing red...well that is about as wild as we staid Brethren get.

Unfortunately, Pentecost is different this year. We are all experiencing this worship service from computers and smartphones at home. How many of you got up and put red on for this service? I figured.

Everything is altered right now...and it makes us notice things...things we used to pass right by. I have become so aware of plants and flowers as I go for my daily walk. They are intricate and beautiful in a way I never before stopped to notice. I sat on my patio this week, early in the morning and stared up at the morning sun trickling down through the leaves of the tree above me. It was magnificent. I take more time to listen to the words of my family and friends on the phone. I see them in new and tender ways.

I am also noticing new things in scriptures I have preached from for years. This is my 35th year of pastoral ministry. I have preached on Pentecost so many times and, of course, I have to use Acts 2 as my text. I thought there wasn't anything new to see in this scripture but something jumped out at me this year. Let me tell you about it. Peter gets up to preach, in the middle of a chaotic moment. The spirit has swooped in. People's hair is on fire. They are talking in different languages and they all understand each other. In this moment Peter chooses to read from the book of Joel. The text he selects starts like this: "In the last days," God declares, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh."

In the last days...in the last days...that is when God sends her Spirit...in the last days. Why did Peter choose a scripture text that begins with "In the last days" on the day the Spirit arrived. Did he feel like we do? Like the blessing that Taloo read to us today? Like the world is broken by its war, penchant for power and the history it refuses to rise above? Like we are fragmented by our individualism, our refusal to care for the vulnerable, our idolatry of money? What does Peter think the last days are when he chose to quote that scripture?

Well it turns out that Peter made a minor alteration in the scripture from Joel when he preached from it...in order to have it speak to the present moment. The book of Joel begins with a plague of locusts and severe drought. The people are called to repent and they do. The natural disaster is over and God pours out his spirit on all flesh. The text from Joel which Peter uses in his sermon doesn't begin with "In the last days." It begins with "Then afterwards...God will pour out his

Spirit on all people.” But Peter quotes it as “In the last days...God will pour out the Spirit upon **all** people.”

“Then afterwards” doesn’t fit here. Peter is marking this moment when the Spirit arrives with a mighty rush as the last days. “This is a moment” he is saying. You know what a moment is, right? Stonewall was a moment. Ferguson was a moment. Newtown was a moment. Pearl Harbor was a moment. Stonewall wasn’t a beginning but it was a moment. Ferguson didn’t mark the beginning of the murder of unarmed black citizens on our streets. It marked a moment of public prophecy called “Hands up. Don’t shoot.”

Stonewall is an inn. Ferguson is a city. They existed long before the moment we learned their names. Pentecost was a pilgrim festival of the Jewish tradition. But it became a moment for Christians when the Spirit came in and interrupted the status quo.

In the time of Peter -- when the world was broken by idolatry of money, a penchant for power, an Empire run amok -- God sent the Spirit like a mighty rush. When the world got so out of balance...when it became fragmented and dangerous...that is when the wind began to blow. Peter wasn’t announcing the end of the age. He was announcing the beginning of one. Pentecost is a launching story. It is a moment. It is a story about a moment in time when everyone present became a prophet.

If I could be as bold as Peter I would change his adaptation from “in the last days” to make it relevant for us today. I would change his adaptation to “In the time of Covid-19”...the time when the world had lost its equilibrium...when the Earth was groaning...when billionaires hoarded money while God’s children were dying of starvation...when an unarmed black man, out for a jog, was murdered in the streets...when houses of worship were being told to open, as if they had ever closed down...when people greeted each other at a distance, wearing masks and afraid for their lives.....that is when God’s Spirit began to blow. That is when God said, “It is time to send my Spirit. It is time to set some people’s hair on fire.” That is when the ache of all this evil began to open us up. That is when the struggle...the grace scorched us. God spoke and said, “I will send them out through every technology that exists so they can be my voice in the world.” That is when prophets were born in the young and the old, men, women and those who identify as non-binary. That is when people stood up and said, “Enough. We can’t keep going this way. We demand a moral Pentecost.”

When things seem especially dark...that is when God sends her Spirit. In the time of Covid-19 God blew through the people like the rush of a mighty wind and set their hair on fire. People who spoke Portuguese and Mandarin. People who spoke Tsee and Hausa. People who spoke Spanish and Swahili suddenly all understood each other. They began prophesying in one voice begging others to hear them. “We envision a new world,” they prophesied, each in their own language and yet they all understood each other. “We need to stop living like this. We are destroying creation and killing each other,” they cried, speaking many different languages and yet in one voice. “We are done having a polite conversation while over 20% of Californians live in poverty.” In our diversity, through our diversity, God is speaking in all languages right now.

God is setting us on fire. As we live in this time may people look at us and say: “He is on fire. She is on fire. Look, they are all on fire.” This is the reason we were made. For this ache that finally opens us...this grace that scorches us toward one another...for this time.

“In the time of Covid-19,” God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people.” May we be set ablaze this day. Amen.