

Sermon: Caught Up in a Wildfire

Scripture: Acts 2:1-11

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It's been 50 days now since we celebrated Easter and while Easter was this amazing moment of ecstasy and joy for the disciples in realizing that Jesus lived despite the devastating defeat of the days before, still the disciples were baffled at what it all meant. Day upon day was passing for them and while they had these amazing visions of the risen Lord, the new world that they believed was about to be ushered in through this victory of God's Son – the culmination of all things and the ushering in of the final victory - had not arrived. In fact the world was pretty much going on as though nothing had happened. There was a time when everyone in Jerusalem was talking about it. But after a week went by and then another week and another week business pretty much returned to normal. Though the disciples had experienced him resurrected they weren't admitting it publicly, fearful that the authorities would do to them what they had done to Jesus.

The resurrection, which at Easter seems like the culmination of the story, was only the beginning.

Pentecost was a Jewish feast originally, one of the three great feasts that occurred during Springtime in ancient Israel. It was the celebration of the renewal of God's covenant with Israel, of the handing down of God's laws to Moses on Mt. Sinai. If you were a Jewish male living within 20 miles of Jerusalem, you were expected to make it to Jerusalem during this time. So in the days right after Jesus' death and during his resurrection appearances, Jerusalem was a crowded and busy city, packed with Jews

from all over the known world at the time, all speaking their own languages, a mass convergence of international people. Some of them had probably heard about this self-proclaimed Messiah who was killed by the Romans, others might have heard the word on the street that his followers were still around somewhere licking their wounds, but there would be others who wouldn't have heard about had transpired in the city over the past month.

But if you were there at that time and could make it through those narrow bustling streets that are only wide enough for foot traffic and lined with boisterous shop-keepers and if you could wind your way to the higher northwest corner of the city and find the section of the city where there were a bunch of homes that had large upper rooms, and if you could have found the right door leading through the court yard of one particular house and up the back stairs to the large room and if you knocked on that door, you would have scared the living day-lights out of the gathered assembly there. Because you would have found this group of disciples of Jesus holed up in that room discussing what they were supposed to do now after having seen Jesus risen. "He told us to wait here. He told us something or someone would be coming to help us. An advocate of sorts? Let's hope, cause I'm not going out there by myself!"

And if you could have been there on the 50th day, during Pentecost, when this Advocate actually arrived, you would have experienced an profound thing with them, so profound in fact that its something we read about and write about and sing about even now 2000 years later and will for 2000 years down the road. It was so mystical and miraculous that it was hard to describe in words so Luke refers to the moment with images of the most elemental forces of nature: wind and fire.

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Whatever it was, the effect of it was that this anxious and bedraggled little group of Jesus followers who were lost and confused and afraid of what might happen next suddenly began to move out from that place and proclaim on the streets of the city the good news that the one they called Jesus, the one who had been handed over by the religious authorities and crucified by the state authorities, was truly the Messiah, the messenger of God. What exactly it was that happened, they didn't quite know themselves, but it turned their little 12-person insular fearful group into a revolutionary movement that changed the world maybe more than any other movement has ever done in the course of human history. Whatever it was that happened to them, happened in a big way – there certainly was a there, there - and we know this because we wouldn't be sitting here today in this place that we call church and talking about Jesus of Nazareth, the risen Christ, had it not happened.

It was like a mighty rush of wind. It was like tongues of flame. They received the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit on that day and because of it, they no longer were silent and hidden in fear, but boldly and loudly and publicly began witnessing to the risen Christ, and carrying on the loving work that Jesus had been doing in his lifetime. Despair had given way to hope; fear had given way to courage, meaninglessness to purpose, sorrow to joy. And it wasn't like their fear subsided because they were suddenly

sure God would protect them from pain and suffering. It was more like the fear of pain and suffering, failure and ostracism, no longer held sway for them, all that paled in comparison to this burning gusty desire to share what they now knew was true and they were really willing to risk everything, their very lives for it... which many of them in the end did!

They were dying to say that Jesus Christ, the one who came to show God's love and was scorned by our religious authorities and executed by our civic authorities was the revelation of the one true God, he won the victory over death, he offers forgiveness of sin, he invites us to a new life, and says follow me.

And that seems innocuous enough, doesn't it, until you hear it from the perspective of the power-holders at the time, then not so much! "Wait a minute," they say. "I don't know who this Jesus fellow is but he is not Caesar and Caesar is the one Lord of life and its to him that your devotion lies." And then you have the Jewish authorities saying "Wait a minute! You don't get to truth and salvation, forgiveness and the love of God without going through OUR temple and without practicing our laws and sacrifices and being one of us. This Jesus man is not Messiah and God! That's blasphemy!"

To speak with great devotion and love about Jesus as being the way, truth and life, is to imply that many other things and ways that demand our devotion and obeisance and bended knee – the devotion to Caesar, the devotion to the temple, the devotion to the market economy, the devotion to country, the devotion to one's group, those are all secondary if not erroneous. And this is what the disciples went about saying and spreading their message of love and acceptance and devotion to God above all else regardless of what the authorities thought or did to them.

Many of them were killed eventually to silence them from convincing people to commit to something greater than the state and deeper than their religion. But the authorities couldn't destroy the Spirit that was inspiring them. To quote an activist in South Africa from the time of Apartheid: "you can cut down a flower but you can't keep the Spring from coming." And the Spring had sprung at Pentecost and was spreading, a Springtime of forgiveness and love, a springtime when all people were to be seen as children of God, when the least of those among us were understood to have access to God, when the poor and orphaned and widowed, the imprisoned and marginalized became not objects of disdain but subjects of deep care and attention. This was the Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke so often about during his lifetime, a kingdom of radical grace and great love where the social stratas of society were finally leveled out; a king and kingdom whose subjects were less about self-preservation and more about preserving the common good, less about self-advancement and more about advancing the downtrodden, less about accumulation of wealth and more about distributing the abundance equitably, less about imitating and desiring the lives of the famous and powerful and more about imitating and desiring the life of Christ.

And that same Spirit is vital and alive today if we have ears to hear, eyes to see, hearts open to it. If we are willing to place our lives in the service of Love. If we are willing to put our lives to work for the kingdom of God. We shouldn't underestimate what is possible in this world when those tongues of flame find willing subjects for God's purposes and the mighty winds of the Spirit begin to blow upon those flames. We could very well find our own lives caught up in the wildfire that ensues.