

Pentecost Year A 2020
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
May 31, 2020
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem

Acts 2:1-21 Psalm 104:25-35, 37 1 Cor 12:3b-13 John 20:19-23

On holidays and fire

“Religious holidays punctuate the year to remind us of God's grace breaking into ordinary time.” That is an excellent description of religious holidays in general. Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat wrote those **bold** words as part of their faith story, and the words are fitting for today. This is Pentecost, a major feast day of the Church, and, as with other feasts/celebrations, Christians adopted and/or adapted this feast from Jewish practices. Pentecost is fifty days after Easter, mirroring a Jewish festival that takes place fifty days after Passover. This was the day that the “first fruits” of the harvest were taken to the Temple. The day also honors the day that God gave the Torah to Moses; synagogue readings of the day include the Ten Commandments. Christians conclude “the Great Fifty Days” of Easter with this day of Pentecost, marked by a “sound like the rush of the wind,” and “tongues of fire,” flames, that appeared on the heads of everyone gathered. This is God breaking into our ordinary time. It is customary to wear red to church on this festival to represent those flames, that fire.

The Brussat’s story continues with the recommendation that **a good spiritual practice is to notice these feast days that break into our lives** – and this year, into our still semi-quarantine, and express our gratitude for these days.

How might we celebrate the ongoing gift of God’s grace? That’s a tall order. How could we possibly honor God breaking into our lives, upending our lives in God’s name? We do that for Christmas, and Easter, Advent and Lent. It would be an excellent spiritual practice to broaden our recognition and celebration of Pentecost. 2020 may be the year in which we really expand our “feast recognition” to our homes, imprinting upon our lives that we are called to live our faith every day.

In the Middle Ages, some churches had holes in their ceilings to symbolize their openness to God. (I do not recommend this practice for our church or our homes!) On Pentecost, doves were released through the holes in the ceiling, and bundles of rose petals were dropped through the holes and onto the people gathered inside. How beautiful! God's spirit represented by the doves, and God's grace and many gifts represented in a shower of flower petals. While this was happening, choir boys walked through the congregation making whooshing sounds and playing drums. What a grand celebration!

Here is a modern practice that you can do at home. The Brussat family made a tree of twisted vines; I happened to have some fake branches and greenery from a prior project, and I am using those. You could decorate some branches or a small tree with red doves/birds and silk roses, or craft flames out of paper or other items that you already have. Red paper? Fabric or string, or something that you can imagine is red. As you place your items on the tree, think about the way that the Holy Spirit has added fire to your life and faith.

Give thanks for the gifts of the Holy Spirit that have brought breath and the intensity of fire into your life; think about these gifts. Name them. Give thanks. If you have set up an altar area or holy space in your home, add your branches to it as a prop to help you think about the exact gifts of the spirit that God has given you.

Acts 2:17 gives us a strong description of these gifts: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."

What can you prophesy, or hear, see, and dream?

I intend to transition my Pentecost tree into our next church/liturgical season, sometimes called "the long green season." It is in the many weeks after Pentecost that we learn more about Jesus and his teachings. I wonder what findings I might have to keep Jesus in mind, and not only in mind, but in a visible place and in the center of my life? I invite you to try this tangible, three dimensional spiritual practice with me; a stick, a tree, a sticker on the refrigerator ... notice, think/pray (about the gifts you have been given), and give thanks.

We are in urgent need of the Holy Spirit's fire. The protests against the death of George Floyd under the knee of a police officer have devolved, in some places,

into “absolute chaos.” Such violent chaos is not a sign of the Holy Spirit. The fire of the Spirit that cleanses our hearts and turns us to the love of God is not the fire that burns cars and buildings. From a Friday night news conference, the mayor of Atlanta, Keisha Lance Bottoms, said this.

“It’s enough” [Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms said in an evening news conference]. “We are all angry. This hurts. This hurts everybody in this room.” “Tearing up a city? ... This is not how we change America. This is not how we change the world.”

How **do we** change the world? By continuing to be the church, by standing next to our neighbor – every neighbor – and proclaiming that Love still stands, even when we cannot see the fire. Love will reign and Love will come again. In the Daughters of the King we ask: “God, what would you have me do? That is the question for each of us to ask God today and every day. God, what would you have me do? How can my life, your life, our congregation’s life together extinguish fires of injustice and serve God, serve love, with “a fierceness that burns?” We must strive to protect the dignity of each and every person. Vote. Change unjust laws. Stand up for others. Be courageous. Pray. Act, and love.

To our graduates: congratulations! Another phase of your education is complete; you have shown adaptability and persistence in completing your studies in a quarantined world: graduating “virtually,” and distancing yourselves from just about everything and everyone. Congratulations. Now, go change the world! Take with you our prayers and God’s love. Take with you the new and ancient fire of the Holy Spirit; show us and the world what Holy Spirit fire can do.

I pray that God continues to fill us all with the Holy Spirit so that we might be transformed. Writer Samuel Chadwick describes what the Holy Spirit in us looks like. "Spirit filled souls are ablaze for God. They love with a love that glows. They serve with a faith that kindles. They serve with a devotion that consumes. They hate sin with fierceness that burns. They rejoice with a joy that radiates. Love is perfected in the fire of God."

Come, Holy Spirit, come holy Love, and set our hearts on fire. Amen.