

# *Holy Fire*

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

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Acts 2:1-21

*“Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.”*

We are all waiting. I think our lives are spent moving from one moment of waiting to the next, and we are in a constant state of waiting. We are waiting for our tax refund; we are waiting for our chance to order our food. We are waiting for the traffic light to change, the other person to finish talking, and for the sermon to be finished. We are all waiting. Often, our waiting and our anxiety are connected; the greater our anxiety, the more intense the waiting. In Stephen Crane’s work, *The Red Badge of Courage*, half of the story is focused around waiting. A youth, recently enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War (or war of Northern Aggression) is waiting to go into battle and see combat for the first time. As this youth waits, he wonders if in the heat of battle, if he will run away or if he will stay, stand, and fight. The more he waits, his own anxiety concerning his courage increases until that moment when he finally sees combat.

Like a runner at a race just before the starting gun. Our muscles are tense, our mind becomes focused only on that goal which we most desire, and our attention to the rest of the world is gone. Just let the gun go off! Just let us jump in, stop waiting, and move to action. Just let us control, force, and direct everything in our lives. No more waiting, only action, because at least then we know something will be happening. Emerson said, “If the single man plant himself indomitable on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him,” (from *The American Scholar*). Or as Longfellow more plainly put it, “All things come round to him who will but wait,” (from *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, “the Student’s Tale”).

But we don’t want to wait, do we? We don’t like to pace back and forth, checking the window every 45 seconds wondering if our guests have arrived, wondering if the baby was born, wondering if your child made it home ok, and wondering if your spouse has good or bad news. We don’t like the lack of control. And while it may drive us crazy, it is a part of life that we cannot avoid: we are all waiting.

We are waiting for the next chapter of the story of Christ to begin. We are with the disciples, gathered in Jerusalem, and waiting for the next chapter of this Jesus movement. We are waiting. Think about where we have gone, the story we have heard and told about Christ. We were there in Bethlehem when he was born. We all gathered around the manger, swooned and cooed at the baby Jesus. What a night, and what a beginning of promise. We were with him as he grew, as he moved from the boy to the man. Remember his first sermon, proclaiming the day of the Lord? Remember how sure he was, how he challenged those listening, and how they did not respond favorably? We walked with Jesus as he gathered together a rag-tag group of friends and associates. Peter, Andrew, James, John, and the rest all became his messengers, his inner circle and his closest friends. We saw the healings, we heard the sermons, and witnessed the events like his baptism and transfiguration. We remember hearing his words of future sacrifice and salvation as he turned his face towards Jerusalem and began that final walk into the holy city.

We were there on Palm Sunday, for the triumphal entry of the king. We were there for the last supper and for the trail. We walked with Christ, behind Christ to the hill of skulls, to the

place of his execution. How we wept when Christ was lifted high on the cross, how we wept when his head was bowed and he breathed his last. How we wept as Christ died. We remember this entire story because we were there with him.

And then we remember the empty tomb, three days later, when hope was renewed. We remember the joy, the amazement, and the exuberant feelings when Christ returned to be with us on that first Easter morning. Christ continued to walk with us; he began to teach us, give us instruction, preparing us for his absence. Christ began to give us the foundation to be his messengers in the world, and things were starting to make sense. Then, just a week ago, Christ left us, lifted up into heaven, ascending to be with God. And now we find ourselves again, waiting, waiting to see what is next, and what it is that God is going to do. We may be anxious, because things were going so well after Christ's resurrection, and now we are again alone, without him. The disciples started to understand, really understand who Jesus truly was, and then he left. Christ started to speak plainly about his ministry, and his mission. But then he left us.

Thus we find ourselves in the room with the disciples wondering what will be next. It is like a good book that pulls you through, leading you to the next chapter, and we are anxious to know what that next chapter holds. Like Gary Cooper in the movie *High Noon*, waiting for the noonday train to arrive, our eyes keep looking at the clock, knowing that with each minute we draw closer to the next chapter, to the next part of the story. Christ promised, the disciples hope, and we want to believe that something new, something exciting, something powerful will occur leading us into the next chapter of the Christ movement, this movement which we have followed from birth to death, and to new life. We are waiting, waiting, waiting for the next chapter of this Christ story.

And then, without any warning, we experience the Spirit, and know that it is a new beginning. Without any warning, fire, holy fire, comes upon the disciples, surrounds them and changes them. This is what the disciples were waiting for. The Holy Spirit, the fire of God which cleanses, changes, and makes us whole is what the disciples were waiting for. The disciples are still their sinful selves waiting for whatever is next. We are still our anxious selves, we are still our selfish selves as we hope and wonder, and then the Spirit takes them and takes us and changes us. One of the early Christians, John Chrysostom, who lived from 347-407, said, "...wherever the Holy Spirit is present, He makes men (sic) of gold out of men (sic) of clay." Our limited, human nature is made full and complete by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Look at what happens to the disciples. These ordinary individuals are brought to a new level, given new speech, given new tongues to preach the Word. The disciples are led to preach, are made to proclaim, and are moved to continue to live the Christian story in a way they could not on their own.

This is the power of the Holy Spirit. It is joy, it is hope, and it is God's presence in the here and now. It is a power which leads you to shout Amen when you normally wouldn't shout. It is a power which leads you to pray when you normally wouldn't pray. It is a power which keeps hope alive in your heart when all else around you seem dark and lost. This is the presence, the advocate, the power which Christ had promised. This is what we are waiting for, this Holy Fire, the presence that surrounds us, sanctifies us, and leads us.

For now we are made a new people, now we are made a unified people, gathered by the Holy Spirit. Alone, we are just a gathering of individuals who have happened to come together. Alone, this church is nothing, our witness is nothing. But when the Holy Spirit descends we are changed. When the Holy Spirit becomes the mortar, the glue, the foundation of our lives, of our church, then we are changed. We become a new people with new eyes, with new lives. Without warning, our waiting ends, the Holy Spirit descends and we begin a new chapter in our own lives.

We no longer remember the life of Jesus, and the story of Pentecost, but we experience it

and live it. This is what I am challenging you to do today. Not to remember Pentecost as if you were reading a story, but to experience Pentecost because you are living it right now. Look at the words Peter is offering to all the Jews who have gathered. Peter looks out at them, sneering at him, jeering at him and mocking him and wondering about him, and Peter reminds them of celebrated words of the prophet Joel. Peter looks out and claims that the Day of the Lord which Joel was predicting, the day of suffering and hope, the day of prophesy and the pouring of the Spirit; this is that day. This is that day! Peter's powerful statement at once places the disciples in their role as proclaiming the glory of God, at once places the church in the context of the hardship and suffering of the world, and at once connects the disciples with the traditions of the prophets, with the God of liberation, and with the message of redemption; the day of the Lord, the day of hope and redemption. This is that day!

And today we read those words as well, we hear the story of a wait ended, of the Holy Spirit descending, and of a new chapter beginning. The theologian, David Tracy, calls this story of Pentecost a "classic" story. It is a story that points us towards the truth of who we are, of our fellowship with Christ through the Holy Spirit, and of our focus as a church. The Pentecost story informs our own identity. James McClendon, the Baptist theologian, goes one step further. McClendon looks at Peter's phrase, "this is that," and claims the same for us. McClendon is claiming that the church today is the church which was formed at Pentecost, the movement of the Spirit proclaimed by the prophet Joel, experienced by the disciples, is also experienced today. This church is that church which began on that first Pentecost day.

Think about this. This church is that church which was founded 2000 years ago. We are a diverse people, we are a people who literarily speak at least 5 different languages fluently. We are a diverse people from different social languages - we are from different economic walks of life. We are a diverse people with different political ideals, different theological ideals, and different cultural ideals. How can we continue to worship together? How can we continue to fellowship together? How can we continue to grow together?

We continue together through a love for Christ and through the work and the power of the Holy Spirit. Because we are that Pentecost church can we be a church.

This is that church 2000 years ago; a band of followers who all professed Christ as Lord, who all loved the Lord. That is all we ask, demand, and require. That you say "yes" to Jesus and follow him. This is that church which 2000 years ago was changed and connected and guided by the Holy Spirit. That is all that is expected of you, that you allow the Holy Spirit to strengthen your relationship with Christ, to guide your relationship with each other, and to continue to transform each person here; to continue to transform this entire church.

This is that church which received and receives the Spirit, and our sons and daughters shall prophesy, our young shall see visions, and our old shall dream dreams. The least and the greatest shall proclaim the word of God. We will look out into the world and see the signs of blood and fire. We shall see suffering caused by war, suffering caused by neglect, suffering caused by hate, suffering caused by greed, suffering caused by isolation, and we shall call the world to the Lord just as the disciples did that first Pentecost day. This is that church which changed the world, which is changing the world and which will change the world. You are those disciples who have experienced the Holy Spirit falling upon you, who can preach the gospel in any language, any form, and can call the world to Christ. This is that church. We aren't just remembering the story, but we are living the story, we are the story.

Living and inviting all people to live out this story together in fellowship with God. Remember how I started? We were waiting. Now we have received our mandate, we have received our Holy Spirit, and we are no longer waiting. Now we are ready to go into the world, and bring people to Jesus. Right? Well guess what, we are going to have to keep waiting. We are going to have to wait for the Spirit to move us and change us. We are going to have to wait for

the Spirit to show us where to go, how to act, and what to say.

But the waiting is changed. The waiting is a waiting for hope that we know is real and promised, a waiting for the salvation which we have already experienced, a waiting for the visions we have already seen, and a waiting for the prophesy we have already heard. We are waiting for the Spirit that has already brought us into fellowship, into relationship with Christ. This is something that Jürgen Moltmann suggests, that the Holy Spirit renews the church's fellowship with Christ, and that is what we are waiting for, that is what we are experiencing, that is what we are living; a fellowship with Christ. It is the Holy Spirit that brings us from the manger to the cross. It is the Holy Spirit that leads us to the empty tomb, to the resurrected Jesus. When we read the scripture, when we hear those divine words imbedded in the text, it is the Holy Spirit that opens our ears to the power and profound affects. But we cannot force it; we cannot make the Spirit come at our beck and call. We can only wait, knowing that this gathering of believers today is that same gathering of believers who were changed, transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit, and we will continue to be changed, transformed and renewed.

So go out, and live your lives, knowing that at any moment the Holy Spirit may grab you, lead you, and challenge you. Go out and live your lives, knowing that at any moment the Holy Spirit may lead you to speak in ways you may never have predicted. The Holy Spirit may lead you in ways to act in ways you never thought you could. Wait for the Spirit and the Spirit will lead you. Open yourself to the Spirit and the Spirit will change and transform you. Allow yourself to be filled with the Holy Spirit and you will know what it is to be a follower of Christ.

With the Holy Spirit, we are those apostles in the world, proclaiming to the world the Day of the Lord, the hope of the Gospel, the life received through Christ. Let the Holy Fire fall upon you, baptize you, and lead you boldly into the world for the sake of Christ. AMEN