

Manuscript: Pentecost Sermon “On Fire”

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When I first became a Christ-follower in my late 20s, what I knew about Christianity, you could carry around in a bucket. A small bucket. I knew next to nothing about church history, the Bible, the Methodist tradition. The first time I heard the word “Pentecost,” I immediately looked around for someone to tell me what the heck it was. I was told, “It’s the birthday of the church, the day the Holy Spirit came down to earth.”

I heard the scripture from Acts that we read this morning, and learned how after the resurrection Jesus told his followers to stay in Jerusalem. He said, “*John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*” That’s from the first chapter of the book of Acts.



“The birthday of the church, when the Holy Spirit came down to earth.” That’s a nice, neat, non-threatening way to explain Pentecost to a brand-new Christian like I was then.

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On another Pentecost Sunday, back in 2010, it was 12:30 in the morning when a loud pounding on her front door woke up my friend Audrey Warren. She had just really fallen into a deep sleep, as it had been a late night for her. She had taken her new pastoral intern out to the movies. Audrey had been serving for 11 months as the pastor of Branches United Methodist Mission in Florida City, about 40 miles south of Miami. (You didn’t even know there was a city south of Miami, did you? Florida City is the last city on the Florida mainland before crossing the bridge to the first of the islands called the Keys.)

Someone banging frantically on your door in the middle of the night is never the most pleasant way to wake up. With adrenaline pumping, Audrey leapt up and ran to the door of the parsonage. She found some of her church members standing on her porch, in obvious distress. “The church is on fire, Pastor Audrey!”

They rushed to the car and sped off toward the church. When they arrived, a large crowd was already watching the firefighters work to contain the blaze.

Just that year they had received a \$90,000 grant to refurbish their playground, and children and families from all around the community would come each day to enjoy that safe place with ample shade from the

Now that playground was burning.



The church building had been in disrepair, as many older churches are, but the people had recently spruced it up with new window hangings and paintings by a local artist. It was a space they were proud of. A place where they had been married, been taught, had friendships, had their children baptized, had been held as they grieved, worshipped God. It was a place they loved.

Now that church was burning.

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Pentecost. The birthday of the church, when the Holy Spirit came down to earth. That's a nice, neat, non-threatening way to describe it to some who was, like me, new to the church. But it gives a false idea of what happened that day in 2 important ways.

First, saying that "the Holy Spirit came down to earth" gives the impression that the Holy Spirit was just kind of hanging around, waiting for the start flag to enter into our world on Pentecost. But the Spirit has been at work since the very beginning of, well, *everything*. Involved in the creation of all that exists, the Spirit has been consistently and continuously involved. Never ceasing, never stopping. A part of all that is, the same Spirit that is available to us now.

Second, talking about the "birthday of the church" is deceptively nice, neat, and non-threatening.

Acts 2:1-2: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting."

I want you to imagine that as you are innocently sitting there, paying attention to the sermon (or mentally working on your grocery list), that suddenly you hear a deep rumbling noise, seemingly off in the distance. Is it thunder? On a such a beautiful day as this? It gets louder, and you realize it is not coming from one direction, but every direction. Then you feel your hair starting to lift up on the back of your neck. Out of nowhere – and everywhere – a huge inrush of air plows through those doors, rocking your bodies forward and blowing the bulletins out of your startled hands, pulling those papers in a vortex up to the top of this sanctuary's peaked roof in a cacophony of roaring wind.

That's more like what happened on that first Pentecost. Not a breath blowing out a candle on a birthday cake. But a fierce rush of divine power stirring up the dust of humanity.

It was loud and impressive enough to have people from all around coming running to see what was happening. Verse 6: *"And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each."*



That Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was causing something powerful, something NEW to happen in the world.

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On Pentecost morning 2010, before the sun came up, as Audrey stood with her parishioners, watching their church burn, she heard words that pierced her heart: “Whoever did this, we’re going to get them!”

Audrey had heard stories in the community about how quickly violence could escalate in that area. At that time, the crime rate in Florida City was more than five times the national average. She knew that something had to be done. She also knew that on her own she hadn’t a chance of being able to stem the tide of violence that was already rising in the spirits of the people she had grown to love. But she realized that if something didn’t happen right away, it would quickly become too late. So, as the firefighters doused the last flames, she told everyone watching that they would still have their Pentecost Sunday services. Spread the word! Meet back here at 11!

The people came – from the church and the community – and stood on an area of the property that the fire had not touched, the debris and ashes of the church and playground clearly visible to all. And Pastor Audrey preached on forgiveness. She told me, “I knew they weren’t ready to hear that message. It was too soon. But it was what they needed to hear.”

Then she did something incredibly bold. Offering Communion to the people standing there in the hot South Florida sun, she told them to only come forward to receive the bread and juice if they were willing to be a part of this new thing that God was going to do through the people of Branches United Methodist Mission. Only come forward if they were willing to seek forgiveness instead of retribution, love instead of hate.

In what Audrey could only describe as a movement of the Holy Spirit, every single person came forward. Not one refused to make that courageous commitment in front of their entire church family.

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That first Pentecost morning in Jerusalem, something new happened in our world. It was the birthday of the church, yes.

But it wasn’t a nice, neat, non-threatening birthday. It was much more like what happens on an actual day of birth. It’s intense, and a little frightening. It is labor, it is groaning. And it is creative, bringing something new into the world that wasn’t there before.

When the Spirit moves within the church, it is a thing of power and beauty. And something NEW is the result.



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For 7 months after the fire, the people of Branches United Methodist Mission met under a tent. When the Florida summer's heat was scorching, they had popsicles during worship. When it was chilly, they shared hot cocoa. If it was windy or rainy, they just moved their chairs in a little closer together. Eventually they were able to put a portable building on the property, which housed all their ministries, including the worship services. When I spoke with Audrey this past week, she excitedly told me that they're finally moving out of the portable into the new church building.

If you went there today, you would see a vibrant worshipping community: Haitian, Hispanic, White. Many different races, nations, worshipping together. More than 70% of those worshipping on Sunday are under the age of 18. More than 70%! I don't need to tell you that this is not at all usual for a mainline church!

The people are deeply involved in their community's issues. Things like feeding the hungry, teaching children, immigration reform, improved conditions for migrant workers, summer camps, GED classes, English lessons, student leadership programs, college prep. Its after-school program welcomes 150 children each day. Mission teams from all over Florida and the United States go to Branches to help out... but also to learn from that vibrant community.

God was doing something NEW with the people of Branches.

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On the back of your bulletin, there is a painting depicting Pentecost. Several weeks ago, during the *Spiritual But Not Religious* series, I talked with you about how the church is called to be an "icon" of God in the world. In the eastern Orthodox traditions, icons – beautifully ornate and complex portrayals of religious themes. Icons are used in Orthodox worship as windows directing our focus to the God behind the icon.

I love that imagery. We are to live in a way that when people see us, hear us, observe us, they are able to see God through our words and actions.

This particular painting is an icon created by a Greek Orthodox artist named Theodoulos Gregorites. In it you can see the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit, and at the bottom there is a figure of a man with arms outstretched. This man is an allegorical figure, representing the *kosmos*, the world. There are many icons of Pentecost, but I particularly like this one, because of this addition. It's a reminder that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not just a gift for the recipient. It is meant to be a gift for *everyone*.



That day in Jerusalem, fifty days after Easter, the Holy Spirit began a new thing. Those disciples – those friends – of Jesus, who had previously been timid and unsure and afraid, suddenly became full of joy and courage. The crowds who had rushed to find out what was going on were amazed. When they heard the message of the disciples, 3000 made the decision to follow Jesus that very day, and were immediately baptized.

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That day in Jerusalem over 2000 years ago, the Holy Spirit moved a group of unsure, uncertain people to boldly stand and proclaim God's word.

That Pentecost Sunday 2010 in Florida City, the church in Florida City began a journey that would show their community what Christ's love looks like.

This day, right here! The Spirit – that same Holy Spirit – is available to us.

Being the church – really being the church – is not always neat, nice, and non-threatening.

Because, frankly, we human beings? We're messy. We make mistakes. We get annoyed with each other. We have different opinions about some pretty important issues.

And yet, *together we are the church!* I believe that the Holy Spirit is moving here at Aldersgate – in Collingwood and in Kingstowne. God has already done amazing things through this wonderful family of faith. And I believe that God has even greater adventures in store for us!

And because I believe these things so strongly, I have homework for you. Yep! Homework! I know it's the beginning of summer vacation, but I have an important assignment for you, one I hope you'll accept.

I am asking you to pray each day that the Holy Spirit would do something powerful, something NEW here at Aldersgate. Pray that all our hearts would be stretched and strengthened with God's love, and that the Spirit would move in our midst in a way that we would increasingly be icons of and for God in our world.

Now, I'll tell you that praying like this is a mighty bold, courageous thing to do. Because we don't know what the Holy Spirit will do. It will not necessarily be neat, nice, and non-threatening. What it *will be* is life-changing and world-transforming. It will be beautiful and creative... and we get to be a part of it!

I offer this to you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!