

Sermon – May 28, 2023
“The fire of the LORD fell”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 2:1-21 & 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Be poured out fresh on us this day, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words that they may be a blessing for your people, a blessing that continues our transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Thought I would check before we put greeting and response away, but be ready, you never know when I might slip it in as a reminder of what Christ has done for us. I was reminded this week, as I think we all should be, of the people in my family who served this country during its times of need. I recalled my father and four uncles who served in World War II and the men I met who sat off the coast of Korea and shelled sites from battleships during that conflict. I remembered friends who went to the jungles and waters around Vietnam and young men and coworkers who went into the countries of the Middle East during the many conflicts there. It is fitting that tomorrow and today we let our memories bring forth the service, lives, and sacrifices of those we have known. We should recall how their lives impacted our lives. I pray that we will stop and recall those who gave so much so that the citizens of the United States and citizens of countries where they were asked to fight might be free.

Today is Pentecost, the 50th day after Easter, ten days after Jesus ascended to heaven. Jesus' disciples are gathered together and have been praying for the Paraclete, the Comforter, the Spirit of Jesus to come. They are praising God and longing for the promise Jesus gave them to come. Their hearts are open, expectant, and yearning for this gift. As I read this text, I hear the words speak to their strong desire to receive the Comforter, to receive Holy Spirit. May our hearts also be open and yearning for Holy Spirit.

Most of the sermons I have heard or preached about Pentecost tended to focus on the speaking of the mighty acts of God heard in the tongues of the world and the disciples' new boldness found at Pentecost. But as I prepared for this morning's sermon, I found myself drawn to the divided tongues as of fire that rested on each disciple. And I began to ask, "What is the fire that was seen at Pentecost?" In response, I started a journey through the Bible looking for fire from heaven. I would like to share some of what I encountered on my journey. Let me start by sharing that in the Bible there are 474 occurrences of the word "fire" and many times that number of occurrences of related words such as "burning." So, to identify and quantify all of those occurrences is not a simple task. By contrast, let me share that there are 714 occurrences of the word "love." So, there is more love in the Bible than fire, but that is not the conclusion that I am seeking to share. Let me invite us to take a short journey. We will not look at all 474 places where the word "fire" is used, but we will look at a few occurrences of fire from heaven in the Bible. Let's see if we can begin to understand the fire from heaven that comes at Pentecost by looking at these other occurrences of fire.

One of the early occurrences of fire is found right after Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and are removed from the garden of Eden. At the garden gate, we find the flaming sword with the cherubim guarding the way to Eden. Adam and Eve cannot return to Eden as the way is blocked by heaven's fire.

Let's move forward across many years to a moment in time when Abram was invited into a covenant with God. Turn to Genesis 15 and there, starting in verse 17, we find "When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land'"¹ We might notice that when God makes this covenant to give Abram the Promised Land, Abram does not pass through the halves of the slain animals as would be normal to establish a covenant. Only God, here seen as a smoking fire pot and flaming torch or fire from

heaven, passes through the halves. God tells us that if Abram or his descendants break the covenant, God, not Abram or humanity, will bear the burden. God will become like these slain animals to pay the price for a broken covenant.

Now let's jump forward to another time fire from heaven appears, a time when we find a burning bush on the side of a mountain. We have moved to Exodus 3:2: "There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed."ⁱⁱ We know this story well. Moses turns aside to see this great sight and encounters Adonai and is sent to lead Israel out of cruel bondage into the Promised Land. As God begins to move, we see fire from heaven that is not the fire we know. It burns but does not consume. In Exodus we find many occurrences of fire from heaven. When God leads Israel out of Egypt by His mighty hand and needs to separate the Egyptians and Israelites for a night, we find the pillar of cloud lighting up the night and forming a wall between these two groups. The source of the light is fire from heaven.

And in Exodus 19:16-18 after Israel arrives at Mount Sinai, we find "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently."ⁱⁱⁱ During this occurrence of fire from heaven, the Law, the Torah, is given to Moses, and the people of Israel begin to have the presence of God with them in the tabernacle they build to allow God to be present with them as they journey to the Promised Land. We find the Law, the Torah, given with the fire from heaven.

In Exodus 24:16-17, we will also find these words describing fire from heaven, "The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel."^{iv} With this encounter, we begin to catch a glimpse of fire from heaven as a fire that devours yet is the glory of Adonai.

Let's jump again in time to 2 Chronicles 7:1-3: "When Solomon had ended his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of

the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.'"^v With the end of Solomon's prayer, fire from heaven falls and consumes the sacrifice, and the glory of Adonai fills the temple. We find the devouring fire from heaven consuming the sacrifice and the glory of Adonai filling the temple, and in response, the people worship and praise God for His steadfast love that endures forever.

Now let's jump in time again, this time to 1 Kings 18:36-39. The appearance of fire from heaven here occurs in connection with the contest between the prophets of Baal, those who worship a false god, and Elijah, the great prophet of Adonai. After the false prophets of Baal cry out to their god for hours, nothing has happened. No fire from heaven has come down to consume their sacrifice in response to their cries and actions. But when Elijah's time to cry out to Adonai comes, we find these words, "At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, 'O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.' Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.'" When the fire from heaven appears this time, the response of the people is to proclaim Adonai as God. Our idea of fire from heaven and the response of people who witness it should be growing to include a response from God's people.

Let's make another stop, this time at Isaiah 6:1-8. These words may be more familiar to our ears: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of

hosts!' Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'"^{vi} With the vision of Adonai's throne, we find again fire from heaven, here as a burning coal brought to Isaiah by an angel and touched to his lips. Fire burns away Isaiah's guilt and blots out his sin and, in response to God's question of who will go for us, we hear Isaiah's cry of "Here I am; send me!" The response to fire from heaven grows to include the desire to be used by God to go and speak to His people. With the appearance of fire and the removal of sin and guilt, Isaiah is able to be used by God to call all people to Him. Our understanding of the presence of fire from heaven should be growing to include a response to serve Adonai.

Let us make one last stop in the Old Testament, this time at Malachi 3:2-3 where we find these words: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness." Now we see fire from heaven as the refiner's fire that purifies those it is given to until they are able to present offerings to Adonai in righteousness. The fire from heaven purifies those that God gives it to so that they are at last able to be those whose works are works in righteousness and are pleasing to God.

Let's jump into the New Testament and make one quick stop, in Luke 12:49 where Jesus tells his disciples, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"^{vii} Jesus tells his disciples that he came to bring fire to the earth, and he is waiting and preparing us to have this fire kindled among us. Jesus will bring fire from heaven to his disciples. With these words, we who seek to follow Jesus should be preparing our hearts for fire from heaven.

And now we come back to our text from Acts: "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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."^{viii} We recognize that God has kept the covenant He made with Abram when fire from heaven passed through the halves of the sacrifice. God, through Jesus' death on the cross, has become as one of

the dead animals keeping the covenant that humanity could not keep. Now Jesus has sent fire from heaven, pouring out Holy Spirit on men and women who are servants of God, slaves of their Lord, who are refined by fire, whose sins and guilt are taken away by fire and, in response to God's call, boldly stand up and say, "Here I am; send me." Peter demonstrates what the response to fire from heaven burning in us should be as he, now refined by the fire from heaven, stands up and addresses the men of Israel in Jerusalem and calls them into a relationship with God, through Jesus Christ in the power of Holy Spirit. The fire that Jesus was anxious to kindle on earth, which is the love of neighbor and love of God, has been kindled and set loose in the hearts of believers. Jesus' mission is not over; it has just begun. In the Old Testament, the giving of the Law followed Adonai's coming in fire. In the New Testament, the giving of a new law follows the coming of fire from heaven. Jesus' Spirit is sent to believers, his body on earth, to continue doing through them what Jesus did as he walked the earth. The age of Holy Spirit, the refining fire, the divided fire that Luther described as fire having no limit as to how many lamps it may light, has begun to go forth and kindle fire on earth. Fire from heaven comes once more and is not to be repeated in any of the texts that describe the coming of Holy Spirit. The fire at Pentecost marks the beginning of the age of Jesus' disciples kindling fires that burn in the hearts of people, all people, who hear the word of God and respond. The age of the Spirit is born. We are now those who live in this glorious age. Fire from heaven falls not on a sacrifice in the temple built by human hands but on our bodies, living temples of God, the vessels of all people who are now refined to carry the Good News, the Gospel, to all of the places they are led. "Here I am; send me" becomes, or should become, the universal response of all people to fire from heaven. The giving of the Law that followed fire from heaven before now becomes the giving of a new law, the command to love one another. The new law burns within the hearts of those who have Holy Spirit present within them as a desire to spread the flame of fire from heaven to all people. The new law, the law of grace, love, and boldness, has been poured out from heaven. We are to catch Peter's response to fire from heaven and become those who boldly go and love others, lighting new fires in hearts yet untouched by the love of Jesus, fires that have no limit to spread, fires that light up the night, fires that fill hearts with power to love each other.

As I look around the room this morning and see the bright colors we are wearing, I am reminded of the fire from heaven. It is a beautiful sight to see, all of the bright colors that look like a great fire burning among us. We as believers in Christ have been refined. We are temples

of the living God. Jesus has been the sacrifice that takes away our sin and now he waits to give us power to be at work in this new age, the age of Holy Spirit, the age of the in breaking kingdom of God. Our response should be like Peter's response on that first day: to boldly stand up and go as we are led to set fires in the hearts of others so that they like us may burn for Jesus! God has descended not to a mountain top, but to His people to set them ablaze within, to consume their sin, to refine them so that they become those who offer themselves in righteousness without guilt as a sacrifice to Adonai and are sent out as sons and daughters burning with the law of love in their hearts who willingly lay down their lives and share the love of Jesus with the lost of the world. John Wesley said, "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on Earth."^{ix} As believers, we have this gift of fire from heaven and if we will pray and open our hearts, we also may receive a fresh outpouring of fire from heaven. Let our response become as Isaiah's was when God asked, "Whom shall I send?": "Here I am; send me." Let us go out boldly as those who desire God and, through Holy Spirit, shake the gates of Hell.

Pray with me: Jesus, kindle a fire in our hearts. Refine us, that we may willingly be those who boldly proclaim to the world the Good News of Jesus Christ. Jesus, bring your fire to us in this place. Pour out your Spirit here and change us to be your people who love others as you love us. Come, Holy Spirit, visit, set our hearts on fire and let us go forth to the world with hearts blazing with fire from heaven. We pray in the name of the Father and the Son and in the power of Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 15:17-18, Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 57). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 3:2 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 155). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 19:16-18, Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 191-192). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Exodus 24:16-18, Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 203). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^v 2 Chronicles &:1-3, Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 1001). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} Isaiah 6:1-8, Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 1590). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^{vii} Luke 12:49, Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3143). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^{viii} Acts 2:1-21, Ibid.

^{ix} Wesley's Journals