

**Scripture Lesson: Acts 2:1-18**

*Pew Bible N.T. pg. 111*

<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. <sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” <sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy;  
your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit,  
and they shall prophesy.

Acts 2:1-18

05/19/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Fire In a Crowded Theater”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Many of you know that before I served here in Saginaw, I was appointed to First United Methodist Church up in Hancock, Michigan, in the northwestern U.P on the Keweenaw Peninsula. It’s beautiful, rugged, snowy country up there, often called Copper Country because of all the copper that was mined there for decades. I happened to be serving up there in the winter of 2013, when the area marked a macabre milestone, of sorts.

100 years earlier, in July of 1913, the mine workers of the Western Federation of Miners, working for the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company, had gone on strike. It was a hard time. The mines were sitting empty, the company was losing money, the union was doing their best to help the miners, but was running out of funds, and an agreement between the mine and the union was no closer to fruition. Christmas Eve of 1913, the women’s auxiliary for the union held an event for the miner’s children and wives. They gave out small gifts to the children and food staples to the women to try to help them through a meager winter. The event was held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Italian Hall in Calumet, Michigan, about 12 miles north of Hancock. At some point that evening, someone yelled “fire”, and panic ensued. All the guests rushed for the one stairway leading down from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor hall.

There's a lot of speculation about what happened then. Some say that while the outer doors opened outward, the vestibule doors opened inward, and as the crowd pressed against those vestibule doors, they could not get the open and people were crushed and trampled. Others say that anti-union thugs barricaded the doors. Still others say that the stairwell was simply too steep and too narrow to support that kind of crowd in a panic. Whatever it was, when the dust settled, there was no fire, but 73 people, including 59 children, had been smothered or trampled to death. An investigation by a subcommittee of the US House of Representatives revealed that an anti-union sympathizer paid by the Calumet and Hecla Mining company had gained access to the event and yelled fire – a stunt that backfired on the company as unions from around the country sent material support to the miners in Calumet. By April, the company was forced to make concessions, and the strike was settled just in time for the beginning of WWI as the need for copper was skyrocketing.

The Italian Hall incident was referenced in an opinion written by Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendall Holmes in 1919, in which Holmes argued that the defendant's speech in opposition to the draft during World War I was not protected free speech under the First Amendment – a decision that was overturned in 1969, if you're interested. To this day, using speech to intentionally cause panic that leads to loss of life is not protected by the first amendment. We're not allowed to yell fire in a crowded theater.

Rewind the spool of time back with me even further, another 19 centuries to about 50 days after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jerusalem is packed to the gills with the faithful. Remember that 600 years before Christ, the Babylonians had exiled Jews all over their empire. When the Assyrians took over 70 years later, the Jews were allowed to return home. Some did. But by that time, many had settled and made new lives for themselves in their exile. Grandchildren didn't want to go back. Over 600 years, Jewish communities had grown and thrived in many far-flung places. But it was still practice that every devout Jew should make at least one pilgrimage to the Holy Land during their lifetime. So, every year, Jews from every corner of the Roman Empire travelled to the holy city for the Passover. Most historians estimate that the population of Jerusalem would double during this season. So, you've got Jews from all over. You've got Roman Soldiers on heightened alert. You've got travelers of every ilk going from Europe to Africa and back. Jerusalem is a powder keg. It's a tinderbox. It's a crowded theater. Can you picture it?

Now, the vast majority of Jews who make the pilgrimage stay for Pentecost, which was a Jewish holy day long before it was a Christian holy day. Pentecost, in the Jewish Faith at that time, commemorated the giving of the law to Moses, up on Mt. Sinai, written on two stone tablets. But on this particular Pentecost, the fire that comes to the crowded city isn't malicious or hateful. Quite the contrary. It's the gift of new life and wholeness and hope. To the 120 or so disciples gathered in the upper room that day, the Holy Spirit comes down to fulfill Jeremiah 31: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors... <sup>33</sup> But this covenant, I will put within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people..." The fire that comes takes up residence in the heart. In a radical paradigm shift, we move from knowing commandments to knowing the Commander—the one who commanded the world to be, and it was; the one who commanded the wind and waves to be still, and they were; the one who said, "I give you a new commandment: that you love others as I have loved you". And they did.

And now the time has come to take that lesson beyond their own safe little circle. And just as Jesus had promised them the night he shared the last supper with them, he sends an advocate, a guide, one who will both build their internal faith and equip them with gifts for what's next.

How does that work? I wish I could give you an easy answer. The Holy Spirit is how God moves in context and circumstance. It's how God works in individuals and groups. The Spirit may move one way in one place, and in a totally different way someplace else. Sometimes, the Spirit moving can be challenging, uncomfortable, and a little scary. None of those are good reasons to resist what God is doing. Because if it builds community, if it shapes people to be more loving, more compassionate, more courageous in working for justice, more devoted to God, and more committed to scriptural holiness, it's probably Spirit-driven.

In his book *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians*, Tex Sample tells about a conversation he had with Don Bakely, who'd been in urban ministry most of his life. "In his early days, he pastored a church in urban Camden, New Jersey, and he had a no-nonsense secretary named Ella who ran the front office. Now, Don Bakely tried hard to get out of his office and really connect with the gangsters and druggies and street people in Camden, and he especially wanted to reach a pretty notorious street thug Big Mart. One day he was sitting in his office, and he heard a commotion outside, profanity, shouting, a loud argument. It was between Ella and Big Mart. Big Mart had finally come to see Don, and when Ella's brusque manner rubbed him the wrong way, he called her an obscene name. Well, Ella wasn't having that. Pretty soon, she came tearing into Don's office demanding that he come throw Big Mart out.

"Don said, *"Ella, I've been working for weeks to get him in here. You want me to throw him out the first time he comes?"* Then he told Ella how "Big Mart" had once been a little Martin, a child who watched his father beat his mother to death right in front of his eyes; a child who had only ever known violence and cruelty. Ella listened to the story quietly and when he had finished explaining the circumstances of "Big Mart's" youth, she didn't say a word. She just turned and walked out the door.

"When she returned 20 minutes later, Don was not sure what to expect, but she entered his office, crossed her arms, and stood there. "Well?" he finally ventured. "Well, I guess I'm going to have to learn how to get cussed out." she responded shortly, and returned to her work. "And," said Don Bakely, "that was the day that real ministry began in that little church in Camden." [3 ¶s adapted from Tex Sample, *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 160–162.] The Holy Spirit went to work on the streets and alleys of Camden, NJ, but it wasn't easy.

When we let the Spirit touch our hearts, inform our stories, open our eyes, intrude on our comfort, ignite our compassion, invigorate our labor, it may not lead us to anything we envisioned. It will tap personal, spiritual, financial, and human resources we aren't sure are there. It won't be something we can control. We may well be asked to sacrifice, to go uphill on a steep and rocky path, to get cussed out, to feel another's pain when it's too awful and we'd rather not. But hear this: we will never have to go it alone and we will never be asked to be anything other than our authentic self. We bring our broken selves, our secret sins, our difficult relationships, our worn-out spirits, our fearful hearts, our bewildered minds, and that little sliver of hope that just wants to make something in this world a little better for someone else, and the Holy Spirit can work with all of that. The Spirit moves. It's ready and waiting, here and rearing to go. It draws us together, it draws us to God, it draws us to the streets. So let the Spirit breathe in you. Let it soar in you. Let it burn in you. It's fire in crowded soul, but it won't smother you or trample you down. It will give you what you need. It will give you hope. It will give you courage. It will give you vision. It will give you purpose. It will give you life, now and ever, now and ever, now and evermore. Thanks be to God. Amen.