

SERMON- Pentecost (B)

Charles R. Cowherd

~~Ezekiel 37:1-14~~ Acts 2:1-11 (~~12-21~~) John ~~15:26-27; 16:4b-15~~ Psalm ~~104:25-35, 37~~

Good Shepherd (Burke)

May 23, 2021

OPENING:

My earliest memory of Pentecost comes from my childhood in the church that I grew up in, and there being a gigantic birthday cake with red frosting and countless flaming candles in the parish hall after the service.

We were celebrating the “Birthday of the Church.”

One young person from the congregation was to be selected to blow out the candles of this massive cake. And I wanted to be chosen.

I was not, and so I sang “Happy Birthday” along with everyone else through my disappointment. As the song ended, the young boy who *had* been chosen summoned a deep, deep breath to blow out the candles.

The young boy blew a big gust of breath and the candles all went out....

But only for an instant....

Suddenly they reappeared as healthy flames. The young man drew another breath and gave it another shot.... Only for the flames to again appear above the candles.

(You know what I was thinking: “*I* could have done a better job than him.”)

And you also know the reason why the candles still were flaming: “trick candles” had been placed on to the cake—non-extinguishing ones that would keep relighting despite the boy’s best efforts.

BAPTISM:

The lesson was a good one on that day and this one as we celebrate Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the date on which the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and those gathered with them some 2000 years ago.

We gather to celebrate, understanding that the Holy Spirit’s presence remains and that those tongues of fire cannot be extinguished.

We celebrate it especially in this service through the baptisms of our newest members in Christ:

“Mabbina Joy

Julia Hope &

Thomas Christian.”

(If you are keeping score at home, our middle names are “Hope, Joy, and Christian.” So far, so good: we have a dynamite group!)

Speaking of dynamite, the same ingredient used in dynamite is used in Trick candles. Magnesium is added to the wicks of trick candles, so that when the candle is blown out, the ember ignites the magnesium, which then catches the candles' vapor just like the fuse of a dynamite stick!

That's why trick candles are banned in Canada; Trick Candles are a little bit dangerous. They are unpredictable, they appear when we don't expect them to, and even when we try to blow them out, the Holy Spirit shows right back up again!

In all, Pentecost involves some pretty crazy stuff—you have the breath, the fire, all these different languages conspiring, allegations of drunkenness—because the Holy Spirit is no easy idea.

Maybe that's why the secular world has not been able to grasp on to Pentecost in the same way that it has Christmas or Easter. Stores have never picked up on it, there are no "Pentecost" cards at Hallmark or "Pentecost" music specials on TV. Because of the emphasis on the Holy Spirit, people are sometimes a little scared of Pentecost.

Then you add Baptism on top of it and gets even MORE exciting.

Now, we wear the bright Red today because of the Pentecost Fire but, in merry Old England, I am told, they wear white, and Pentecost is known as "Whitsunday," as they celebrate baptisms on that day.

Baptisms can be dangerous too. Think of the white robes that people would wear "Down to the river" to get baptized in a moving body of water. They would get dunked, fully immersed, holding their breath for dear life 3 times as they were reborn as new people.

That's an exciting, dangerous activity.

The Church loves that story, linking it to the Flood and Noah surviving it, the world reborn after being washed over completely, or likening it to the Israelites coming up out of the water of the Red Sea in the Exodus.

You will also hear echoes of that same image when we do the prayer over the water in a little bit and we talk about Christ's death and resurrection.

These are all powerful, Spirit-filled, Pentecost, moments.

Maybe we will get just a little glimpse of that excitement in our celebration of Baptism today, depending on Mabbina's reaction to being brought in front of a large group of people early one morning and having water splashed upon her head by people in strange robes.

Exciting, different, unpredictable so...

It fits that God so often appears as fire in Scripture, but white still works as a fashion choice because, as the lowliest of Cub Scout or Girl Scouts knows, the red fire in a flame is actually the least hot. I did some research, and here's the stats: the dark red flame is only about 1000 °F while the white part of the fire and the flame is almost 3000 °F!¹

Therefore, that first Pentecost day burned white-hot in its intensity and in the memory of the disciples. It was seared into the collective consciousness of those that were there. Likewise, I know those that will be baptized and their families will remember this day always, or at least every 17 years you will because of the Cicadas, because Pentecost is the sort of excitement and energy that this life of faith is about.

One word about Baptism for the parents, their participation is also one marked by a mixture of bravery and vulnerability—not unlike Peter's throat-clearing speech on that first Pentecost. They venture something within an uncertain future, you don't know exactly what's going on in this adventure known as parenthood, but there is trust that the Holy Spirit will give you the words, and will translate for you in the future.

Think about: in 2038, our youngest Mabbina will be graduating high school, then Thomas and Julia will be young adults, Brood X returns, with careers and maybe families of their own in 17 years. Then you will celebrate another year of being Baptized with fire and water into God's family.

¹ [What Are the Colors of a Fire & How Hot Are They?](#)

CONCLUSION:

So “Happy Birthday” to the Church today, another trip around the Sun. And congrats to all those to be Baptized.

My wife and I were joking recently that, because of COVID, we have not had to go to as many birthday parties of those under the age of 5. Those birthday parties, if you are unfamiliar with them are chaotic, unpredictable, exciting, hard to handle, even a little bit dangerous. So in other words, they are like Pentecost: who knows what’s going to happen.

Being Baptized works along the same lines, welcome to this new crazy community known as the church, the water is great, but you cannot predict what is going to happen next.

We do know that the Spirit provides beyond our hopes and expectations. The feast of Pentecost, with that mixture of vulnerability and bravery in the midst of danger, shows the Holy Spirit’s power. On this day and always, we lay claim to our Baptismal Identity, with the color red (or white!) as our dress code to this Birthday party, with Tongues of Fire proclaiming whose we are.

AMEN