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Title: Firecrafter

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Scripture: [Acts 2:1-8](#)

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Growing up, there was one Sunday a year that we got to have birthday cake at church for the church. I didn't understand it at the time – I probably thought that it was the anniversary of when that church began, much like we recognize April 28 as the birthday of Geist Christian Church – we just passed our 36th birthday – an anniversary. As I

got older, I understood that the day the church got cake was a church holiday called Pentecost. That day is today and maybe next year, if you're good, you'll get cake. One step at a time – you got coffee today.

To fully grasp this day – and here's your history lesson for the day – we have to understand that Pentecost is a major festival day that did not originate with Christianity. It was a Jewish festival commemorating the giving of the Law to Moses. Its occurrence fifty days after Passover corresponded with tradition that Moses received the Ten Commandments fifty days after the Exodus.

There were three great Jewish festivals to which every male Jew who lived within 20 miles of Jerusalem was legally bound to attend. They were Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The name Pentecost means "the fiftieth." And another name for Pentecost was "The Feast of Weeks." It was so-called because it fell on the fiftieth day, after a week of weeks — 7 weeks, each having 7 days - 7 times 7 is 49 - after Passover. Pentecost fell when the rainy season was over. Traveling would have been easier. Some scholars say that there may very well have been more people in Jerusalem at Pentecost than were there during Passover.

The Feast was significant in two ways. One, as I mentioned, is that it had historical significance in that it commemorated the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Secondly, it had an agricultural significance in that, at Passover, the first barley of the crop was offered to God, and at Pentecost two loaves were offered in gratitude for the completed and the gathered harvest. No work was to be done on that day. It was a festive holiday occasion and the streets were filled with people.

So that's the scene in which Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, pictures for us in our scripture this morning. Streets filled with people from all over - "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." (Acts 2:2-3).

Luke goes on to describe how there were in Jerusalem devout Jews from every nation who heard the sound and came and gathered in bewilderment, each hearing disciples speak in their own languages. Some, deeply perplexed, wanted to know, "What does this mean?" Others made fun of the disciples declaring, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2:13)

The Hebrew word for spirit and wind is *ruach* (roo-och). The wind had symbolized the Spirit for the Hebrew people throughout the generations. This wind of God was present at the creation. It was this wind of which Ezekiel spoke of in the valley of dry bones in which a dejected, defeated people would be brought back to life. Jesus used the image of the wind for the Spirit when He was describing to Nicodemus what it is to be born-again by the Spirit. ¹

And now, in the Upper Room, on this day of Pentecost, the wind was blowing, rushing with an incredible force. Perhaps Nicodemus was among those who heard and saw this undeniable evidence of the wind. New thought, new energy, new vitality, new creativity, new emotion came to life by this in-filling of the Holy Spirit. God was bringing life, individually and corporately. God was birthing the church. It's why some call it the birthday of the church.

Not only was wind part of the picture. Tongues of fire were also part of the picture. Why fire? Fire can destroy with a vengeance and fire can refine and make beautiful. The Spirit does both. The fire of the Holy Spirit purges - burns away the chaff - all that debilitates and prevents you and me from becoming who God created you and me to be. The Holy Spirit also refines us. Think about pottery going into a kiln to be fired. Going in, the clay doesn't look like much but coming out, it's a strong and beautiful piece of art. This fire of the Holy Spirit gets rid of what is not Christ-like and then helps us to love others, being people who are more giving, more consistent in our Christian lives, more forgiving.

There is a third picture here. It is that of speaking and understanding other languages. If you read on beyond our text to the names of places that I didn't make the Elder read (you're welcome) - there is an international tone

to it. "And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews, and proselytes, Cretans, and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." (Acts 2:8-11).

An understanding of tongues is the capacity to communicate with people in ways that go beyond human understanding. Gathered in Jerusalem were men and women from many different nations, speaking many different languages. Here were these Galileans, not very sophisticated people really, who were conveying the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ways intelligible, understandable to others.

God's Spirit was poured out upon a community of believers. The Holy Spirit is not a "personal" gift from God. There is nothing personal or private or restrictive about it. The church has always tended to be comfortable with worshiping the Father and the Son but often the Holy Spirit is seen as a sort of marginal, misunderstood entity. But it is clear from this story that the arrival of the Holy Spirit is not hidden from view. The Spirit's arrival is a noisy affair with special effects that draw an interested public "from every nation" to the community.

This arrival of the Spirit completes the picture—God created, God, redeemed, and God is now empowering the people to be who God created them to be. This is the way that God sustains us in this world and the next. The Spirit does not imply a ghostly-type image. It's why I prefer using the language of the Holy Spirit rather than Holy Ghost. Besides Casper, the friendly ghost, ghosts have gotten a bad reputation. I do know that today we sang the Doxology again for the first time in 14 months and the last line is "Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." That's ok with me though because Spirit doesn't rhyme with "host" in the line before it.

Talking about Spirit is talking about God. This is not speaking of bits and pieces of God. This is the fullness of God. This is God's Kingdom coming. Pentecost is hope at its deepest level and the promise that everyone can be ignited by the Spirit to live out their God-called life. Nothing but fire kindles fire.

Pentecost did not create a church. This is not merely the church's birthday. Pentecost is the point at which God's very Spirit was breathed into the world and equipped us for work. Last week, we remembered the ascension of Jesus into heaven, that holiest of absences that left a veritable void in the Gospel story. And so, we waited for the rest of the story. What Pentecost

tells us is that we are now the community receiving the Spirit to take into the world. It is not meant to be a feel-good, warm-fuzzy kind of day.

The Holy Spirit is risky and sometimes painful, bringing about change sometimes out and out revolution. The Holy Spirit invites failure rather than promises success, compels discomfort, rather than consolation. The Holy Spirit is not something that we just try on for size; it is tongues of fire that consume us and leave nothing behind except what was supposed to be in the first place. We should get started.

But how? Let me tell you about achieving the rank of Firecrafter in Scouts. Firecrafter is a camp rank system that recognizes and develops a Scout's camping skills. In Firecrafter, Scouts join a camping service organization that started in 1920 at Belzer Scout Camp just down Fall Creek Road from here.

The ranks can only be earned at camp. One of the final requirements to achieve the last earned rank of Firecrafter is to start a fire – without a match. It's called fire by friction – literally rubbing two sticks together – although it's a little more sophisticated than that. Scouts will practice endlessly to “pop their spark” which lights some natural soft material – small pieces of leaves and dried grass. The Scout, on their hands and knees, will blow on it and nurture the small, fragile embers providing just enough but not too much oxygen. Eventually, a small twig will light from the leaves and grass which lights bigger twigs which light small branches which light bigger branches until there is a roaring fire.

That's Pentecost. That's the picture of what happens to you and me when we are open to the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit. It's what happens when we allow God's wind to propel us, God's fire to purify and refine us, and God's communication to help us convey our experience of our relationship with Jesus Christ to others. The story from the book of Acts takes a core story of liberation and presence of God in the Old Testament and adds a new dimension of liberation from death – Jesus' liberation from death through the resurrection - and its continuing impact on individuals and communities of believers who are open to God's Spirit. That's Pentecost - an openness to God's spirit moving among us.

The danger of organized Christianity today is that it can become powerless! There is nothing more boring than empty theological words. There is nothing more life-sapping, than dry institutional religion that simply puts us through the motions. Jesus did not come to start a new religion called Christianity. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

The German word for Spirit is – are you ready? GEIST. We are a part of SPIRIT CHRISTIAN CHURCH. I know, I know, this area was named after Clarence H. Geist, owner of the Indianapolis Water Company from 1912 to 1938 who envisioned the need for additional water supply for Indianapolis.² The Reservoir and area were named after him and the church was named after the area. I know that but humor me. SPIRIT CHRISTIAN CHURCH. What if each one of us on this Pentecost Sunday had popped the spark of a Firecrafter scout?

Each of those sparks would join to become a force. The 2nd chapter of Acts ends with Peter, yes that Peter, the one who denied even knowing Jesus, speaking so eloquently and persuasively about what Jesus meant to him. What happened with that one little spark that he and everyone else thought was extinguished? “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:41-42).

If you went to church camp or were in youth groups in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, you’ve likely sung about Pentecost without knowing it. In 1969, Kurt Kaiser and Ralph Carmichael collaborated on a musical, “Tell It Like It Is.” It was written to get young people involved in the church. After reviewing what they had written, they decided there needed to be a closer, a modern ‘Just As I Am.’³

Sitting in his den by the fireplace where there were remnants of a fire, Kaiser said it occurred to him that it only takes a spark to get a fire going . . . and the rest came very quickly. They called the song, “Pass It On.” People asked after last week if I was going to sing too. The answer is no. But, if you know this song, it will be an earworm for you for the rest of the day.

It only takes a spark to get a fire going
and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.
That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it.
You spread His love to ev'ryone. You want to pass it on.

Geist, ah, I mean, Spirit Christian Church, Pentecost was made for you. Now it is for you to share it with the world. It only takes a spark.

¹ Much of the background commentary for this sermon was from article, Commentary on Acts 2:1-21 by Frank L. Crouch, May 24, 2015 found at www.workingpreacher.org.

² Information on Clarence Geist found on Wikipedia page.

³ Background on Pass It On song found here - <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-pass-it-on>