

Acts 2:1-21

"Merry Christmas!" In May? Yes...well, sort of. Actually, the proper greeting for today is "Happy Pentecost!" But these two events in history are bound so closely together, that I thought we could begin this way. Christmas is all about giving--God the Father giving His Son to a world full of sinners as a gift. Pentecost is all about giving--the Father and the Son giving the Holy Spirit to the Church as a gift. Christmas...God gives us His son. Pentecost...God gives us His Spirit. Both events in history were necessary for our salvation. Without the Son, we would have no Savior. Without the Holy Spirit, we would not believe in our Savior. Thank God for Christmas, and for Pentecost.

We just heard those verses in Acts 2 which tell us the story of Pentecost. Jesus' Apostles were gathered together with the congregation of believers in Jerusalem. It was a Sunday morning, so they were there to worship. Great things happen on Sunday mornings! God said, "Let there be light" on a Sunday...and there was light. Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday. The Day of Pentecost was on a Sunday. And you gather in God's House on Sundays and are given His gifts in Christ.

On Pentecost Sunday, as they were gathered together, there came a mighty sound which filled the whole house. A powerful rushing wind was coming from heaven; a wind so loud that the people of the city came over to check it out. And what they saw amazed them. Tongues of fire were resting on the heads of the Apostles. Now these men were not magicians. They were not firemen wearing special clothing. Their heads had not first been soaked in water or doused with fireproof chemicals. And yet the fire was doing them no harm. The tongues of fire were burning on their heads, but the Apostles were walking and talking like normal. Well, maybe not quite like normal. They were speaking in languages they had never studied and learned. They were telling the good news of Jesus to all the people who had come out to watch and listen, in their own native tongues.

If you had been there watching all this, what would you have thought? That God was in action? That all of this was by His powerful hand? Here is what some of them said: "These men are just drunk with wine. No mighty act of God...it's just a stage show put on by a bunch of drunks." But it's 9:00 on a Sunday morning, not Saturday night when men get drunk. And drunks speak unintelligently with slurred tongues, not clearly, skillfully, and in different languages. A drunk may light a match and burn his fingers, but these men were quite unharmed by the fire on their heads. No, these men were not drunk.

But that is a typical response to the actions of God. The world always tries to explain away the mighty works of God with some idiot response. The Wise Men showed up in Jerusalem after Christmas, and King Herod responded by seeking to kill the Christ Child. Jesus rose from the dead on Easter, and the Jews responded by saying that His disciples stole His body. You come to church faithfully and seek to serve Christ with your life because God's Spirit is at work in you, yet there are those who respond that you're some kind of a "holy roller;" that you think you're better than everyone else because you do this. When God acts, the world always attempts to make nothing out of it, or to poke fun at and persecute those who belong to Him.

But not all were mocking the Apostles that day in Jerusalem. Many were asking, "What does this mean?" And in response Peter declared, "This is what the prophet Joel prophesied centuries ago." And beginning with the prophet's own words, Peter preached Christ to them, and we're told in verse 41 that about 3,000 people were baptized on that day. Think about this; this is significant. God led thousands of people who were enslaved by sin through the waters of baptism on the Day of Pentecost;

the day when the fires were burning on the Apostles' heads; the day when the Apostles were speaking the languages of the people.

Do you recall the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3? That story is being repeated here on the Day of Pentecost. Moses was minding his own business when he saw a bush on fire and yet not burning up. So Moses said to himself, "I need to check this out;" the same thing the people said on Pentecost. "We need to see this thing...these men are on fire but they're not burning up." So they stand there watching the Apostles in amazement as Moses stood watching the burning bush. And God spoke through the bush. He told Moses about the deliverance He would bring to His people in Egypt. In the same way, God spoke through the burning Apostles to the people. He spoke in their own languages of His deliverance for them in Jesus Christ. On Pentecost the Apostles were like little "burning bushes;" on fire and yet not consumed by the fire. Mouthpieces of God speaking of His deliverance. After Exodus 3 God delivered His people. He led thousands of them through the waters of the Red Sea. Now they were safe from Pharaoh. Now they were released from their bonds and belonged to God. On Pentecost God also delivered His people--three thousand of them. He led them through the waters of baptism. Now they were safe from the devil. Now they were released from the bonds of their sins and belonged to God.

You do not see a tongue of fire on top of my head, nor do I see any fire around you; and yet those same events are repeated here whenever we gather around Jesus Christ. The fire is not on my head, but it is within your heart, because that is where God's Spirit is working when you hear in your own language the good news of Christ. After walking with Jesus on the road to Emmaus Easter evening, the two disciples said, "Were not our hearts burning within us as He spoke to us along the road?" They did not feel that burning when it happened, just as you may not feel any fire in your heart today. But the fire is there, for God promises that where His Word is purely preached, there His Spirit will be working. He was at work through the burning bush. He was at work on Pentecost; on the road to Emmaus. He is at work here today, and wherever Jesus is proclaimed as Lord and Savior.

You, like the people God delivered through Exodus 3, and like the people delivered on Pentecost, you also are people God has delivered. No longer slaves to Satan; no longer in bondage to sin and death; in your baptism God brought you to Himself forgiving your sins. Why? Because you are one for whom Christ died. You are one upon whom He has had mercy. And maybe this good news does not cause your heart to burn within you. Maybe you can come and go here on Sunday mornings without any kind of fire in your heart; without a burning zeal to serve the Lord; without even a deep conviction that you know, beyond any doubt, that God's truth is given here. That doesn't change who you are, and that doesn't change the truth which has reached your ears. All the people on Pentecost heard God's truth that day--those who were baptized, and those who said the Apostles were drunk. Were all baptized? Did all believe the good news of Christ? No, but those who did became Christians by the Spirit working through the Word of Jesus.

That same Word is here for you. That same baptism is the Word and Water which remains on your head. The same merciful God is speaking to you today. And the same Holy Spirit is working in your hearts through the words coming into your ears. His fire is in your heart even though you may not sense it. And this week the Spirit's fire in you will show itself when you love your neighbor as Christ has loved you; when you forgive that person who has wronged you as Christ has forgiven you; when you take time out of your busy schedule to read your Bible and have devotions with your family, to attend that church meeting, to be in God's House next week. The Spirit's fire in your heart shows itself when you teach children the love of Jesus; when you bring a salad to a funeral luncheon, a

canned good to the food drive; when you put your offering into the collection plate; when you open your hymnal and sing with joy.

We don't have 3,000 people here in our congregation. In fact, over the 150 years of our existence only about one-third of that number (700) were baptized here. But God is not impressed with numbers. He's impressed with what His Spirit does in you and through you. You are His beloved people here in Augusta. You are His forgiven, delivered people--every one of you. And today, as with Christmas and with Pentecost, today is all about giving. God is here today, and through His Word and Sacraments He is giving you the gifts of His Spirit--His forgiveness, His life, His salvation. All these are yours now in Christ whether you feel them in your heart or not. Happy Pentecost! Amen.