

“Gathered and Scattered”
John 14: 8-17, Acts 2: 1-21
Pentecost/C, May 23, 2010
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“Ladies and Gentlemen, start your engines!” When is the church like an auto race? When it is Pentecost! I have recently been introduced to the world of auto racing. Now I am a big sports fan, but auto racing is not something I have paid much attention to. When new people enter your life they introduce you to new things. In order to better understand auto racing, I “googled” the topic “auto racing flags.” I was familiar with a few of the flags; however, I was surprised to find there are no fewer than 10 different flags. Each driver knows the meaning of these flags and responds accordingly. Today, in race car lingo it is not time to wave the green flag (which means begin), the yellow flag (which indicates caution) or especially the checkered flag (which signifies the end to a race.) On this day of Pentecost, it is time for the church to wave the red flag! Today, the red flag does not mean stop, but rather with God’s blessing and empowerment move full throttle ahead.

I have only been to one race. It was quite an experience. I went on a Friday night to Stafford Motor Speedway. Hundreds of people gathered in the bleachers that line one side of the race track. The sound of the cars revving their engines sounded the rush of a mighty wind we hear about in today’s story. The racing aficionados brought their full headphones and tuned them into a particular race driver’s channel. Not only did the headphones drown out some of the sound of the race, but they also could hear a drivers’ pit crew communicating with their racer words of encouragement, caution and instruction. I remember the moments just before the race begins. The cars are lined up, revving their engines in anticipation. It is truly electrifying. The green flag is waved and they take off with a rush of excitement.

I imagine this is what it might have been like on that first Pentecost day. Hundreds of people were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Jesus knew what he was doing. He had promised to bless believers with the Holy Spirit to empower and enable them to fulfill the ministry he had begun. Fifty days after the resurrection crowds of people were gathered from all over the region for Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came to transform this Jewish harvest festival into the beginning of something amazing.

It was a holy time and the people were gathered to celebrate and pray. This Pentecost would be like none before. The eleven disciples were gathered together when “fiery tongues appeared on them and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.” One preacher says the Holy Spirit was like the spark in the internal combustion engine. This is a simple yet explosive invention. Fuel ignites, combustion happens, and off you go. Without the ignition there is no movement. Without combustion, there is no race. The Holy Spirit is the source of our spiritual internal combustion. On that day, the Spirit ignited a new moment and a new people. The Spirit rested upon all who had gathered to transform them into an entirely new community. Luke says that three thousand people were baptized on that day. Something truly remarkable must have taken place.

One of the ancient hymns of the church sung on this day and days of ordination says, “Come, Holy Spirit, our souls inspire...and lighten with celestial fire.” That is what happened on Pentecost. It was at once a frightening and exhilarating experience. I imagine there may be times in life when we feel the same way. I think of the day my children were born. A rush of emotions overwhelms you, but you move forward from that moment on fire to be the best parent God has blessed you to be. The preacher James

Lemler says, “It is a prayer that the ignition begun on that first Pentecost day might continue to burn within the church so that we would not lose our fervor or our flare. It is a petition for the work of God’s spirit to continue in us individually and as the whole Body of Christ, so that we might live our faith with zest and commitment and do the work of mission boldly and imaginatively.”

The promise of Pentecost is that every person of faith would be ignited by the Spirit for a deeper expression of faith and more powerful witness. The Spirit begins with the eleven who were gathered together, but what happens is not a private matter. Soon after this small group is ignited by the Spirit they disperse and the crowd begins to hear the message in many languages. The crowd hears a cacophony of languages competing to be heard. Somehow in the chaos, the Spirit allows the message to come through loud and clear. It is like searching for an AM radio station. As you move up the dial, first you encounter static until you land on the intended station. Then, everything becomes crystal clear.

I served with one preacher who always prayed before he preached. “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you my Lord and salvation?” Another such prayer says, “O God, take my lips and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire.”¹ That is certainly more than we hope might happen in the preaching moment and everything we hope might happen. We pray that the Spirit will be alive within us, not only on this day of Pentecost, but every time we gather. We pray that our lips, our minds, and our hearts will be set aflame by the Spirit of God and we will respond like those first believers. We pray that something will happen when we have this momentary encounter with the Holy One that will shape our lives.

After their encounter with the Holy Spirit, those Pentecostal witnesses were changed forever. Three thousand people made a commitment to begin a life following Jesus that very day. Perhaps everyone who experiences Pentecost again today will make the same commitment. Our prayer is the same as the ancient song, “Come, Holy Spirit, our souls inspire...and lighten with celestial fire.” We pray for the spirit to ignite the church for reconciliation. We pray for the spirit to ignite the church for healing. We pray for the Spirit to ignite the church for mission. We pray for the Spirit to ignite the church to share the Good News and become prophetic witnesses.

I believe this is the most important ministry that was initiated that day and perhaps the most difficult for us. We are comfortable showing compassion to others. We are comfortable being generous and welcoming. We are impassioned about mission. However if you ask someone to speak openly about their faith or about how they came to be a disciple of Jesus, everything changes. We are not afraid to have our actions misconstrued; however, it seems more difficult for us to speak out. God is telling us that although actions often speak louder than words; the faith is enlivened when we speak about our experiences of the Holy. So often when we should speak up we keep silent, we stifle the Spirit; we water it down and wave the checkered flag.

The point of Pentecost is not to have this amazing, life altering experience of the Holy Spirit and then keep silent about it. Peter understands that this moment is intended to initiate new believers to accept their roles as prophets and truth tellers. This is why he quotes the ancient prophet Joel who declared, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy,

¹ Dr. James Lemler, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Start Your Engines,” Pentecost sermon, May 11, 2008.

and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.” This is a changing and challenging time for the Christian Church throughout the world but especially in American culture and society. More churches are losing members than gaining members. There are a handful of mega churches that are growing wildly, but they are not the norm. No longer is there a normative religious experience in America. There are many people who describe themselves “spiritual” but not “religious” meaning they have not yet abandoned their belief in a higher power but no longer are compelled to live that faith out within a particular faith community. There is so much competition these days for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit may be speaking in many languages, however far fewer people understand.

James Lemler comments, “We can pretend that we still have the same cultural position that we once had. Or...we can be set on fire. We can pray for and claim the ignition of the Holy Spirit at this moment, in this church, in our church. We can become enflamed and inspirited in our work to serve with compassion and invite with fervor as God’s people today.” We need to create safe communities where we can testify, where we can share with others the ways in which God has changed us. Friends, we need to evangelize. We need to raise our children feeling comfortable talking about “spirit sightings.” Where did you meet God today, how were you touched by this Spirit? What difference does that make? In order to be enlivened and emblazed with the Holy Spirit we need to be more than a nostalgic church, caught reminiscing about the good old days, watching the embers slowly fade away. We are not called to “remember when” but to imagine how. Imagine how the Spirit is leading us into a new future. Imagine how we might stand with our brothers and sisters on the margins so that we all may be part of God’s beloved community. Imagine how the Spirit gives you the courage to become one who dreams dreams and sees visions.

This the day of Pentecost, a day to be ignited once again by God’s Holy Spirit. We can be “strangely warmed” by the Spirit of God. We can be set aflame by the spirit moving in this place. In this time and place, we can not settle for a lukewarm, burned out, tired, tepid Christian faith. The world is longing to experience so much more. May we boldly proclaim with our ancestors in the faith, “Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire...and lighten with celestial fire.” God is waving the green flag, inviting the faithful to start your engines. May we be swept away by God’s Pentecostal power, this day and every day! Amen

Source:

Rev. Dr. James B. Lemler, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Start your Engines” Pentecost sermon, Year A, May 1, 2008.