

Pentecost Day B Sermon 053109
Acts 2:1-21; or Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 104: 25-35,37
Romans 8:22-27; or Acts 2:1-21
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

In the name of the God who sent us an Advocate, Amen.

Three men were drinking and playing poker all through a Saturday night. Early Sunday morning, they started home. As they passed the Catholic church, they felt the need for a little repentance and went inside for the early service. They sang the hymns loudly and put substantial sums from their winnings in the offering plate. After the service, the priest asked the usher, “Who were those three guys?” “Beats me, Father,” said the usher. “They sang like Methodists, they gave like Baptists and they smelled like Episcopalians.”

This is Pentecost Sunday. The day that some refer to as the “birthday of the Christian church.” But the doctrine of early Christianity is not what today is about. The Holy Spirit is the real subject of all of this morning’s readings.

Our alternative reading for this morning is from the Book of Ezekiel and it deals with the valley of the dry bones; a story about God telling the prophet Ezekiel to call on the power of the Spirit to bring life to a bunch of dry bones. The passage from Romans explains to the early Church the power of the Spirit in our communication with God. The Gospel recounts Jesus’ lesson to the Disciples about the Holy Spirit – or Advocate – that He would send them after He ascended to the Father. And of course, the reading from

Acts is the story of the day when that same Spirit actually arrived in the midst of the gathered followers of Jesus – as they mourned His leaving them.

The Holy Spirit is the power of God at work in the world. The Spirit is the “mystery” person of the Holy Trinity. It has no face. It has no shape. We cannot look down the road and see it coming. Nor can we control when it makes itself known or the outcome of its appearance.

The Holy Spirit is referred to in the stories of Jesus’ baptism as “a dove,” coming down from heaven and alighting on Jesus. And most often, the Spirit is described as the wind, or the “breath of God,” as in today’s reading when a wind blows through the door of the upper room as the Spirit enters. But in this morning’s reading from Acts, it is the description of the Spirit as alighting on each Disciple’s head, in the form of a “tongue, as of fire” that I would like for us to consider this morning.

Did you ever wonder why the Spirit appeared in this way – this tongue, as of fire? And sitting on their heads – what is that about? Naturally enough, there are multiple opinions on the subject. But to me, this has to do with illumination. I think these flames had to do with showing forth light. I believe that’s so because what would have been the first thing you would have done if you saw a flame above everyone else’s head? You would have reached up and checked to see if you had one above your own head, right? Of course you would have. And since Acts says nothing about anyone burning their hands, I figure the flame must have been about light rather than heat.

But it also makes sense that the flames were lights rather than heat sources because Jesus told the Disciples that He would send them the Spirit to fill in for Him, after He ascended to the Father. Since John's Gospel and the Apostle Paul refer to Jesus as the Light, it only makes sense that the being Jesus sent to the Disciples would also have been that light that cannot be overcome by darkness, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. It seems to me that the flames came into their lives in order to provide a new light to illuminate the ministry that Jesus gave them before He left.

I'm sure that everyone here remembers being in the backyard on a summer evening and watching as fireflies (or as we called them, lightening bugs) began to twinkle and flutter all over the yard. I'm equally sure that most of us ran around and tried to capture the little beetles to put in an empty mayonnaise jar with holes poked in the top. I remember watching for what seemed like hours while these mystical little marvels blinked on and off, as I sat in wonder.

I read an article last week that suggested that lightening bugs may be an endangered insect. Some entomologists believe that the populations are in decline around the world. They theorize that the reason for the decline is urban sprawl and the increase in population density in what used to be undeveloped areas. Human encroachment not only destroys natural habitat, but more important – according to these scientists – is the increase in the amount of lights that are visible during the evening hours. You see, house lights, lights from automobiles and now even cell phone lights

confuse and distract fireflies. The males of the species use their lights to attract females and when there are other lights around, the females get confused and don't do their part to call the males. The males grow tired and quit blinking. This means less couples are formed and less eggs are fertilized.

Fireflies and the Holy Spirit flame are a lot alike. Both lights are pretty mysterious to us. Sure, you can read about the fact that fireflies light up because of bioluminescence, but that does not mean that you understand how they light up. We can read in Scripture that the Holy Spirit is our Advocate now that Jesus' earthly ministry is over. We can hear that that means even when we cannot pray for ourselves, this Spirit intercedes with "sighs too deep for words." And we can read about the Spirit as the animating force in God's world. But that doesn't mean that we really understand how the Spirit operates.

And as I mentioned earlier, external, unrelated lights can confuse, and ultimately destroy a firefly. The same is true of Christians.

The external lights in our lives are many. Everywhere we look there are shiny lights, drawing us toward them constantly. The light of education is one that can take us away from concentrating on the flame of the Holy Spirit. Now don't get me wrong. I believe in education. I've got three degrees of my own and someday hope to get a doctorate in divinity. Education is a wonderful thing. Unless you allow the things you learn to convince you that you are too smart, too well educate, too worldly to believe in God. Then there is the light of psychology. Again, psychology is a wonderful thing.

This field has helped countless people regain their very lives. But if it goes too far, psychology can begin to convince you that you are the center of the universe and everything else revolves around you. That's idolatrous in anyone's understanding of Scripture.

Then there is culture. This is the light that not only twinkles around us, but shines like the beacon in a lighthouse. The secular – non-religious – world is all around us. And once again, there is nothing inherently wrong with it. Our secular culture brings us music and TV and movies. It brings us leisure activities and hobbies that delight us. And when you interact with people who seem happy and successful without any involvement in church, you might even begin to wonder about your own attachment to this place. But when you allow yourself to be drawn in too deep; when you begin to believe that the light of the culture is the light at the center of everything, your focus has gone horribly wrong.

Fireflies are becoming extinct because they pay too much attention to the wrong lights. They lose focus on the lights that give them life and ultimately they experience death in the dark. Flames as of fire are here amongst us – burning brightly around each of us. The Holy Spirit is alive and well and living here today. The key for us is to keep our focus and never forget where the light that enlightens the nations comes from – and where it lives. Through Scripture reading, through prayer and through giving of everything you have to the work of the Kingdom of God, you focus on that Holy light

that will lead you into true eternal life. Remember it is the only light that darkness can never overcome.

A Baptist preacher tells a story about a young boy who was watching fireflies one night. With great excitement he asked his father what made the bugs light up. His father, gave him the non-answer, “Why don’t you ask your teacher on Monday?” Disappointed, the boy went back to watching the fireflies. He caught one and watched as it walked in his hand, blinking on and off. As the bug started to fly away, the boy tried to catch it again. When he did, he squashed it between his palms. He looked at his hands and then ran into the house. “Daddy, daddy!” he exclaimed. “I know what makes fireflies glow!” His father looked up and said, “What is it?” The boy showed him his palms and said, “It’s the stuff inside.” It’s the tongue as of fire that’s inside. That’s what does it.

Amen.