

May 31, 2009/Pentecost Day/David L. Edwards

## Your Hair's On Fire

Psalm 104:24-35 ... *when you send forth your spirit, they are created....*

Acts 2:1-21 *Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.*

The story of Pentecost is full of vibrant images. The spirit of God is a "violent wind" rushing into the room where the disciples have been waiting as Jesus told them to do. God's spirit is most often spoken of in scripture as wind or breath. It comes, it goes. It gives life to all creatures, including us humans (Ps. 104). It is real and essential to our lives, yet invisible and uncontrollable. We respond to it at a level deeper than feelings or thoughts, in the core of our being. It is experienced in community as we strive together in discipleship to Jesus.

The story begins with the disciples being "all together in one place." The spirit of God is given in community and for community. Community is the context in which we receive God's spirit. This was the vision of the Church of the Covenant from the beginning--the call to be a community of persons committing themselves to following Jesus and to one another in this place. That commitment to community positions us to be open to and to receive God's spirit.

This is not the dominant pattern of life these days. Our culture is highly individualistic and transient. We are always on the move to get what we want out of life. It is rare to find persons who have made a commitment to be together with others in one place! That seems stagnant, "going nowhere." And yet living that kind of migratory life carries a deep loneliness and unfulfillment. We seem unable to be in relationships over time or to become part of a "place" in a life-giving way. We go from relationship to relationship, searching for the "perfect" partner or friend, but each falls short of our expectations. We go from place to place, never content with where we are, lured on by a mirage that promises something better.

The spirit of God is given to the community as it waits together in one place. I think that is a wonderful image for us as a faith community. Our inward journey is to always be waiting for God's spirit. Together. In this place. That means our outward life becomes less conformed to the dominant migratory pattern of life. We renew daily our commitment to be together in this place, open to God's spirit. And as we do this, we find increasingly that God's spirit DOES move in, among, and through us.

Being in community is one of the greatest challenges of life! When we stop running around looking for perfect people, a perfect place, and all of that, we soon encounter the reality of others and ourselves. We begin to learn what it really means to love others and ourselves. We begin to experience God's spirit as we learn acceptance and understanding of others and ourselves. We begin to face things about ourselves that we don't like, that need transformation. Yet, in a community of commitment and openness to God's spirit and love, we find the sustenance and power we need to make changes and to support others as they do the same. The challenge of community is real and difficult. It yields, however, the spirit that we need to become more fully human the way God made us to be.

God's spirit manifests in diversity. One spirit is the life of all of us and of the whole creation. Yet that one spirit is expressed uniquely in each person and her gifts and calling. The story pictures this as flames of fire dividing off and resting on each disciple. This story wakes us up to God's spirit that ignites in each of us the life Jesus manifested, the life of a child of God.

There is a tongue of fire resting on us, whether we know it or not, whether we "feel" it or not. It is there as we work with living the kind of life Jesus embodied and taught. It came with our baptism. It came with the awakening of our desire and commitment to follow Jesus. It came when we started looking at our lives with the question: What am I put on this earth to be and to do? What am I called and gifted to share in the service of life? When we began to see our lives as a journey of faith, God gave us a spirit of empowerment, guidance, and the energy of love for that journey.

I once heard someone say this about another person: "She lives like her hair is on fire." I'd never heard that before! It broke me up! There are some people like that, who throw themselves into life with everything they have, whether they HAVE much or little. The story of Pentecost tells us that together and individually as Jesus' followers, our hair is on fire. We have a flame on our heads, the fire of God's spirit.

Do we know there is a flame on our heads? Are we living as though our hair is on fire? I don't mean being all bubbly and optimistic, or even being "up" all the time. A spirit-filled and spirit-driven person can move

very slowly and thoughtfully through life, not rushing around all the time. A spirit-filled person might speak eloquently or be given more to silence. Paul spoke masterfully about that (1 Cor. 12). There is one spirit. There are varieties of gifts. The one spirit works in different ways in different people. Being a "spiritual person" does not mean one thing. Our spiritual journeys are different, not the same. God's spirit means diversity, not uniformity. The fire of God's spirit looks different in your life than it does in mine. And yet, when we share our journeys with one another, we find a deep, encouraging, and inspiring unity of spirit. Our journeys are our own, but we are in this thing together!

When we are growing in awareness of our value and worth in God's eyes, our hair is on fire. The spirit touches us with a confirmation that we are exactly who God made us to be and to become. We are coming to know our "place," our niche in life, and we begin to occupy that place with commitment, conviction, and care. We stop trying to be like someone else or what others think we should be. We start discovering the wondrous mystery of our own being, and how to let God's spirit unfold it.

Each of us is a gift of God to the world. Many of us don't really believe that. We struggle with bouts of depression, feelings of worthlessness or boredom or futility. We allow our insecurities and fears to make us pretty miserable to be around. Our lives may be filled with things that are painful and hard to face. So we try to be like someone else or we run from place to place. Any greener pasture will do! But it doesn't work. Sooner or later we have to live the life we have, warts and all.

That's exactly the point at which we find the tongue of fire on our own head. The life we have, the life we ARE is exactly the life God has given us to live. The flame of God's spirit rests on the totality of who we are. It burns brightly on us and in us when we are working compassionately and courageously with the things in us that are difficult and painful. That's how we can begin to experience change, healing, transformation. We stop avoiding the difficult things or wishing they would go away. We embrace them just as God has embraced us, in love. To live as though our hair is on fire means to be discovering with growing depth and confidence that we ARE gifts from God to the world, just as we are and as we are coming to be.

The spirit of God is given for mission. When God's spirit rushed in upon Jesus' community, it came with the momentum of mission, of reaching out, of communicating God's love and truth as embodied in Jesus. The Church of the Covenant was born out of the insight that the church exists for the sake of the world, not for itself. First, around 1950, there was a small recreation program for children that arose from the question, "Where will the children play?" This grew over time to become what is now Camp Kum-Ba-Yah. An association was formed to support that mission. It was first called Lynchburg Christian Fellowship, later to become interfaith as Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship. And to support all of that, a small faith community came together as the Church of the Covenant. It has always been our understanding that God's spirit is given to us in community for the sake of ministry, of mission.

God's spirit awakens us to what we are called and gifted to be and do for the sake of the world. Each of us has at least one gift to share with the world. To discover our gift or gifts means finding what we're in this life to be, to do, to give. I'm not talking about "big deals" but "little deals." We get distracted by assuming that a gift is something big. The gift is whatever God has given us to share that benefits the life and ministry of the church, that gives life to the world around us. We begin where we are with who we are and what we are given to do. We don't start by assessing whether or not we think our gift makes a difference or not, whether or not it is important. We just start by finding it, sharing it, and giving ourselves to it. If we are exercising our gift in that way, we will be the sorts of persons who call forth the gifts of others.

The tongues of flame rested on each disciple that day in order for them to communicate this Good News of God's steadfast and transforming love for the world. We have the capacity to see the connection between our gifts and the needs of the world. Exercising our gift IS meeting some point of the world's need, a need that perhaps we don't even perceive. Yet there may be some way we can sharpen the focus, make the connection more specific toward some particular need. This is also the work of God's spirit in us. We see our gifts. We see the needs around us, in the community of faith itself and in the world around us. And we begin to perceive connections. We begin to see how and where we are being called to use our gifts for the healing and renewing of life.

After the wind and fire business, Peter gets up to preach to the crowd. God's promise through the prophet Joel seems to have come about. God's spirit is poured out on all. You are never too old or too young. Your circumstances in life never exclude you. We can all live as though our hair is on fire. In a community of God's love and spirit. And for the sake of the world.