CATCHING FIRE  
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

FOCUS: The Holy Spirt comes to us as a mysterious presence which inexplicably draws us to it not so much so that we might fully understand it but that we might fully experience it and be changed by it.

Fire. There is just something about it which fascinates most of us. Many of you know that one of the things I most want to see in our retirement home is a fireplace. As it turns out, for the sake of energy efficiency, we will probably put it on the back porch. Ironically, having a wood burning fireplace, and in my book those things with gas longs are not fireplaces, is very energy inefficient as they actually draw heat out of the house. It really doesn’t matter to me where it is, inside or out, for me, a fireplace is soothing, relaxing, comforting. I love the flickering flames and get real joy from poking around in the ashes and tending to the logs. And everybody know that a comping trip just isn’t a camping trip without a campfire. On those cool evenings it is invigorating and relaxing at the same time to sit outside, warm hands and toes by the fire and experience the sheer joy of toasted marshmallows on a stick.

How do you explain the attraction of open flames? I really can’t do it. For me it is just one of those things that I clearly experience for which there really is no clear and simple explanation. But the fascination begins early. How many of you parents have had to warn your toddlers not to reach out to touch those lovely orange flames? And what parent hasn’t had to, most likely repeatedly, remind their children, especially the boys, not to play with matches. And it isn’t just the little kids.

I remember how much trouble I got into when Dale Wood and I were wandering around in the patch of foprest near our homes one Wednesday afternoon. I know it was Wednesday because I was supposed to be home in time to attend youth choir practice that evening. We were adventurous middle school guys just hanging out in the woods when it seemed a good idea to gather up a bit of pine straw and make a little fire. There was no real reason, it just seemed like the thing to do at the time. There is that inexplicable fascination.

What we failed to take into consideration was the extreme dryness of the forest floor and the velocity of the afternoon breeze. It was great at first. We poked and warmed and added some small twigs. But soon our little fire began to spread, and it came to be not so very little. We stomped poking and warming and went to stomping and swatting as we attempted to knock down the flames which had ceased from comforting and had begun to terrify! It eventually became obvious that we were out of our league. So we rushed to the nearest house and called the fire department. We waited, they came, they put out the fire, we got a lecture about playing with fire, one which was quite redundant given the circumstances, and we went home. Needless to say, it was too late to make it to choir practice, and that was the least of my worries, if you get my drift.

There is just something mystical, even enchanting about fire, something which draws us toward it, which captivates us. It is therefore appropriate, I think, for fire and flames to be associated with the Holy Spirit and with the coming of that Spirit at Pentecost. For you see this whole notion of the Holy Spirit while incredibly captivating, is more than a bit mystical. If you think you have the Holy Spirit fully figured out, I ask that you see me after service and explain it to me.

Now that doesn’t mean that I am ignorant when it comes to matters of the Holy Spirit. One of the weaknesses I find in some factions of our Christian faith these days is their unwillingness to admit that there are parts of it that they do not fully understand. Some Christian communities seem to be convinced that they must have ***the*** right answer for every question, ***the*** right position on every controversial social issue, ***the*** right method of communing with God and of course must read ***the*** only acceptable translation of the Bible. And they are equally convinced that those with whom they disagree on any issue are not only inherently wrong but probably down right evil. Just as deplorable in their eyes are those who dare question or confess doubt, those who even dare embrace the mysteriousness of corners of our faith.

Think again with me about the fascination we have with fire. It really isn’t at all logical. Sitting on our back porch watching a fire burn in a fireplace that doesn’t even heat a room will be of little active benefit. But I look forward to doing just that and I know now that it will be enjoyable. Yet I can’t explain why I know I will like doing it but I know I will because I have experienced the illusive benefits of watching a fire in the past. So it is with this whole matter of God’s Spirit.

On Wednesday during our prayer gathering, in preparation for today’s celebration, we began to explore this matter of the Holy Spirit. We considered the simple question, ***“What,*** (or as one of you suggested) ***Who is the Holy Spirit?*** How would you answer that question? We discovered that it was not all that easy to come up with a simple answer. The very fact that we were not sure whether to refer to the Spirit as what or who demonstrates the mystery which surrounds the entity which descended on the faithful gathered together in that house on the first Christian Pentecost. I say first Christian Pentecost because Pentecost had been around for many years as the Jewish harvest festival. But that day as the faithful gathered Pentecost took on a whole new meaning.

It occurred to me as I thought about Wednesday’s discussion later that perhaps we were not asking the right question. So this morning, rather than focusing primarily on ***“who or what”***, I want us to consider ***“how and why”.***

I think those might well be the questions the twelve disciple asked that day as well, and for good reason. We are told they were all together. They had just added Matthias to their number and I suspect they were in the house plotting strategy, trying to work out a business plan, so to speak. The disciples had clearly recognized that the fact that Jesus had returned to be with his Father, didn’t mean they could put aside the ministry and apostleship, as Paul described it, to which they had been called. Their responsibility was greater than ever before. They were being called to the same mission and the same sort of apostleship as are we. It was now their responsibility to continue the ministry of love and grace which Jesus had begun, but without the presence of their leader, their mentor, their source of strength.

I wonder what the conversation was like in that house as the disciples gathered. I suspect there were some skeptics. Get twelve people together to discuss anything and most likely you will discover at last one skeptic in the group. Maybe it would have been Thaddeus the disciple we know very little about who would have questioned the motivation for continuing the mission. Of course Simon the Zealot would have been the one to scold him for his meekness and remind the others that they must be proactive and bold. Matthew, the meticulous tax collector, might well have advised some careful planning and strategizing. Maybe some job descriptions would be in order. And then there was Peter, the proverbial cheerleader, sort of bouncing off the walls applauding every suggestion but not really accomplishing much.

Thomas might have been the one to try and bring some order to the chaos. He was the converted skeptic. He had demanded physical proof from Jesus that his post resurrection appearances were real, and Jesus had complied. Like Paul, Thomas was the reluctant convert turned passionate by an encounter. So he might well have been the one to bring some order to the chaos.

Then as they were gathered trying, each in his own way, to map out a way forward, Pentecost happened. They were not expecting it, they had not planned it out, it was not a part of Matthew’s business plan, it just happened, and all twelve experienced it. They couldn’t explain it any more readily than can we explain what it means to encounter the Spirit, but they certainly did have an encounter. There was wind and shaking of the foundations of the house and there were those tongues of fire. We could try, as have many scholars and skeptics, to come up with some sort of natural explanation, say a violent storm with strong winds and devastating lightening. But that is not the point of the story.

It might have been exactly that. Or it might have been some miraculous and unnatural act of God. Some suggest that it was all a figment of the collective imaginations of the disciples. I find that one a bit hard to swallow, but even if it were to be proven the case it would not lessen the importance of the Pentecost events. The message here is not about mechanics it is about results. What exactly occurred that day is not nearly as important as are the results of the events.

So let’s look at the ***“how”*** and the ***“why”*** of Pentecost. How did the Spirit come? It came unmistakably, it came with power and with transformative effect. There were immediate effects. As they were filled with the Spirit the disciples began to speak in languages which were not their own. Note that I did not say they began to speak in tongues. The original Greek here is clear. The proper translation is that the disciples began to speak in “other languages.” Sadly that important facet of the story often gets distorted by those who fascinated by glossolalia, the uttering of nonlinguistic emotional sounds. It is not my intent to get into a discussion of such, which is clearly mentioned elsewhere in scripture. For this morning my point is simply that it is fundamentally important to our understanding of Pentecost that we recognize we are talking here about other languages.

Why is that important? It is important, because the message of Pentecost is that when the Holy Spirit comes, people encounter the truth. And they encounters it in such a manner that they can easily understand it. The disciples were not gifted with that miracle of speech in order to impress folks or to stroke their own egos. The gift of languages was for the benefit of the hearers, not for the aggrandizement of the disciples. The purpose of the miracle was to spread the truth of God’s love, grace and salvation to everyone there that day and to empower them to carry it back with them to their home towns, there to spread the word among the people, to tell the story to God’s children.

We who stand in pulpits on Sunday morning should be ever mindful of the message of the languages. I have heard and probably have delivered sermons which were so full of theological jargon and ivory tower rabbit chasing that it might as well have been glossolalia. I have heard lay folk offer testimonies that were clearly more focused on building up their own egos than on simply sharing the amazing power and presence of that illusive Spirit of which we speak this morning. And I have seen the gospel presented in such a way that, had I never heard it before, I would have run the other way. What would your response be if you were unfamiliar with the totality of the gospel story and message and someone accosted you in the mall parking lot and asked if you were “washed in the blood?” You just might run the other way. As we seek to be those whose lives share the gospel message we need to be certain that both our actions and the words we speak clearly reflect the truth in ways that are both understandable and inviting. What we have to offer the world is the most wonderful gift possible. Yet if we are not careful we may find we have wrapped it up in a message which obscures or even distorts that marvelous truth.

Truth, that is what the Spirit is all about. In the gospel reading for today from John, Jesus is speaking to the disciples. It is his farewell address. He is preparing them for precisely what they would encounter on Pentecost. Jesus says, ***“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth, who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify on my behalf.”***

The Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. Those two characterizations of the Holy Spirt are profoundly important and are more about how and why than what or who. I find the idea that God’s Spirit is the Spirit of Truth both comforting and unnerving. Comforting because in this world of uncertainty and distortion we all need to know that there is foundational truth and we need to know how to encounter it. We do so as we open ourselves to the fire, the wind and the storm which are the Holy Spirit. We do so as we simply experience the Spirit of Truth without trying to fully understand or explain it. And when we do we will find that we are indeed accompanied by the Advocate, one who walks along side of us as the literal meaning of the original Greek word paraclete.

But there is more. In the New Testament we read of the Spirit coming upon folks. In the Old Testament there are several places where we read of God’s Spirit being put within us. The heart of the matter is the same either way. We are not only to experience the Spirit, we are to make it ours. We are to so live that we begin to look and act like the Spirit. We do that as we become living examples of the truth, God’s truth, a truth grounded in love, grace and compassion. We do it as we allow it to lead us into lives that reflect the Spirit of Truth, as we speak prophetically God’s truth, as we open ourselves to godly visions and as we dream dreams of the coming of God’s kingdom to all.

I can’t explain why I am so intrigued by fire, but I am. I cannot explain exactly how it captivates me, but I know it does. I cannot fully explain exactly who or what the Holy Spirit is, but I know that it moves in and around me day by day and I know that if I will open myself to it, it will lead me into all truth and will walk beside me all the way into the kingdom of God. For your sake, for the sake of that kingdom and for the sake of those who need to see the Spirit in action let it be so in your life. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy spirit, Amen.