

‘You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.’ Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, Pentecost, May 11th 2008

The psalm we read this morning is all about God’s activity. It gives great color to the powerful but quite plain account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. It speaks not only of God’s initial creation but also of his continual creative activity and the way in which he sustains the universe. There is a very similar hymn of praise in the liturgy of Egypt but there it is the solar disc or sun-god, Aten who is praised. In our psalm, the sun warrants only a brief mention. It is just one of the multitude of things our God has created. Creating and sustaining things is essentially active. The first chapter of Genesis speaks of God’s breath, wind, spirit, brooding over the waters. Psalm 104 speaks of God’s wind, breath, spirit. In the Hebrew of Genesis and the psalms, the word ‘ruach’ means all three – breath, wind, and spirit. So in our New Testament reading, there is one word, the Greek word ‘pneuma’ which means breath, wind, spirit. On this Pentecost Sunday, we use most frequently the word ‘spirit’. You may notice, for instance, in our bulletin that the opening line of each of our three hymns this morning includes the word ‘spirit’. In all cases ruach in the Old Testament and pneuma in the New Testament convey the active power of God. This power manifests itself both in the created order and in the activity of human beings. Everything, scripture says, is entirely dependent on the spirit of God, moving to create and to sustain.

Our psalmist was a great poet. Like many poets he is able to describe the indescribable. When you think about it, it’s a real nerve for a human being to say anything about God and how he works in the world. The biblical writers were keenly aware of this fact. So they use symbols and imagery from nature to describe God’s creative and sustaining activity. This is what the psalmist is doing when he speaks of wind and fire as God’s messengers and ministers. This is what Luke is doing when he uses the same imagery to try to put into words the coming of the Holy Spirit. Notice Luke admits that he cannot say exactly what it was like. Rather, he says ‘there came a sound *like* the rush of a violent wind’. Like the prophet Ezekiel when attempting to express and inexpressible, he uses the word ‘like’ and the phrase ‘as of’ or ‘as if were’: ‘Divided tongues, as of fire’, he writes to define the indefinable. So with the visual imagery of our sanctuary this morning, we are stimulated to catch a glimpse of God, to experience something of the unpredictable and uncontrollable rush and passion of his spirit. In the Old Testament, only certain people experienced the spirit of God. The prophets especially had this experience, but Ezekiel strains to put his glimpses of God into words. So in the first chapter of Ezekiel, we read: ‘As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber.’ (Ezek. 1:4)

Three years ago, just 20 days after Stephen and I were married, we were out in the desert of Sinai. Our trip was organized by a company called: Wind, Sand, and Stars. It was a good name for it. One evening part-way through our 8-day trip, an Old Testament scholar who was accompanying our group, had two of our party read this psalm out loud as we sat around our Bedouin camp-fire. We could see the magnificence of the constellations in the jet-black sky. And, of course, we could see our faces illuminated by the light from the camp-fire. It was a magnificent setting in which to get a glimpse of the wonder of God’s creation. Not only could we appreciate the stars with no interference from electric lights but we could also

appreciate the power of fire. It is this image of fire and flame which both the author of Psalm 104 and the writer of Acts chapter 2 use to suggest important things about the way God works that I want to focus on in our thoughts this Pentecost.

Fire gives light. In the darkness of our Sinai desert, the light from the camp-fire was very illuminating. Once away from the reach of the fire, everything was very dark indeed. We discovered this every night as each of us tried to make up our little bed under the stars. It sounds very romantic and in some ways it was, but we were very dependent on our flash-lights for trying to find a patch of sand that wasn't too hard and bumpy for a sleeping-bag. Stick by the camp-fire, however, and we could see very well indeed. This is one reason why Luke describes the power of God which the Jerusalem crowd experienced at Pentecost as 'divided tongues, as of fire'. Fire gives light. It illuminates the situation.

How do you know that it is God's spirit that is at work in an individual? You may remember that both Paul in his letters and John in his speak of tests. Both writers link God's activity to the character of God himself. That character is one of love. So gifts that may appear to be spiritual, that may draw attention to the apparent holiness of an individual may well not be worth much. Paul puts it even more strongly in his first letter to the Corinthians. After he has spoken about the varieties of gifts within the church, he goes on to say that without love he is without love he is 'a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal' or simply 'nothing' at all. He acknowledges the huge variety of gifts but he says that they all must build up the body, the church. We are very familiar with this teaching, but our very familiarity with it can make us neglect it in practice. When any of us feels inspired with a bright idea for our church, we have to see whether it illuminates the whole body rather than just us. Indeed, sometimes I may have to let my bright idea disappear because it essentially does something for me rather than the whole community. We are all very familiar with how words spoken in political campaigns can be destructive rather than constructive when it comes to national unity. If we consider the history of the Christian Church with all its different denominations and also the history of any individual church with all its different tastes and viewpoints, we need to remind ourselves that the spirit works to bring not darkness but light. And like any light, we most appreciate it when we are in a dark place. The spirit is like fire and fire gives light.

Secondly, fire warms. We speak of having a heart-warming experience. This may come to us in many ways. Very often it comes to us through the activity of another person. It may be as simple as a smile. It may be a helping hand with a simple practical task, or it may be just the right word that someone speaks to us when we are struggling with some situation. And like any warmth, we most appreciate it when we are in a cold place.

You know, as I was preparing this sermon this week, I was very challenged to continue with my plans to read the psalm appointed for this Sunday, Psalm 104 with its speaking of God active in the wind. A tornado, a typhoon, a desert storm, a tidal wave, a terrible drought brought by El Nino surely raises in our mind serious questions about God's control of nature. And in this part of the world, I hardly need say that someone suffering the devastation of a hurricane would be hard-pressed to recite Psalm 104 or the account of Pentecost where God's activity is depicted as wind. What are we to say about God's control of nature? Do we tell our friend on Pine Island whose house was destroyed by Charlie in 2004 that she and other

people who suffered then somehow needed or worse still deserved this almighty wind in a way that the unscathed people of Palmetto did not? And what are we to make of the heart-breaking scenes of destruction and loss that have come across our television screens this week from Myanmar-Burma? I kept seeing as I completed this sermon and I can see it this morning a particular bit of footage from Friday's TV news of an elderly, frail woman crouching helpless in the rubble that had been her house. Flies were buzzing all around her and walking over her face.

How can the winds be God's messengers? Notice that the psalmist does not say that God is the wind, that the wind is always good, anymore than the New Testament says that all things are good. 'All things work together for good to them that love God' is a very different assertion. The devastating winds of life, be they be literal or metaphorical in terms of the stormy experiences that crash over us may or may not be God's messengers. It depends how open our hearts and minds are to receive the message. And it depends, of course, on how ready we are to become the messengers of God's compassion to those in any sort of need.

This takes us to the third capacity of fire as an image for the Holy Spirit. Fire burns. When Luke in his account of Pentecost quote the prophet Joel, he includes words about fire'. There is more than a hint of judgment about 'the Lord's great and glorious day' about which Joel speaks. The prophets speak of God's word as a refining fire. So it may well be. When fire burns wood or coals to cook our BBQ it is good, and we like this image of God's spirit kindling our hearts and making them aflame. But when we see the devastation reeked by fire in California then again we are reminded that fire is only an image for God. The fire in itself, be it literal, or a fiery experience of testing and refining, is not in itself good. For God to make fire and flame his ministers again depends on how open we are. What is he teaching us in the burning, fiery furnace? How responsive are we as the ministers of God's compassion and grace to those currently feeling badly burned?

'For the followers of Jesus, the day of Pentecost becomes an occasion of profound initiation. With the gift of spirit and flame, the community that Jesus had formed is now fired, prepared, propelled into a new stage of its journey. Like a vessel in the furnace of a kiln, the followers of Jesus receive the transformation they need. They are no longer a group of believers but rather a catalyzed community, a body that, enlivened by the Spirit, will endure and continue the work of Christ.

As those followers knew, we can't always plan our moments of initiation. If we cannot control God, it follows that we cannot control the ways that God beckons or, sometimes, seemingly flings us across a new threshold. We can work to make ourselves available when it happens, but we don't always get to choose our initiations.'¹

In her book *Reinventing Eve*, Kim Chernin describes initiation this way: 'Initiation is not a predictable process. It moves forward fitfully, through moments of clear seeing, dramatic episodes of feeling, subtle intuitions, vague contemplative states. Dreams arrive, bringing guidance we frequently cannot accept. Years pass, during which we know that we are involved in something that cannot easily be named. We wake to a sense of confusion, know

¹ Jan Richardson, May 2008, <http://paintedprayerbook.com/> p 2

that we are in dangerous conflict, cannot define the nature of what troubles us. All change is like this. It circles around, leads us a merry chase, starts us out it seems all over again from where we were in the first place. And then suddenly, when we least expect it, something opens a door, discovers a threshold, shoves us across.'

No wonder one of the chief images of Pentecost is fire. Moses and the people he led through the Sinai desert knew the transforming power of God in flame. The burning bush and the pillar of fire speak to us of the transforming presence of God. 'In contemporary culture, we most often experience fire as a contained controlled, gentle force. Yet the fires of Pentecost are not the tame flames of birthday candles or a cozy winter's hearth; the fires of Pentecost are a sign of the God who resists our every attempt to domesticate the divine and to control how the holy will work.'²

I close with a prayer for Pentecost:

'O God, you brought creation out of the primordial fire. You made us in your image, to be keepers of the holy flame.

Yet far too often we pull back, afraid that we will be burned beyond recognition. Our inner passions for peace and justice – the flames of call and ministry – sputter and grow dim.

We carry our wet worries to your altar, hoping that they may be dried enough to be consumed. We settle for the comfort of a candle, when you would have us build a bonfire in your name.

Forgive us, O God who gave us fiery passion, for we hold back and shiver in the cold. The God who gives us life pours out the Holy Spirit on all who come, and gives us strength to fan the flames of Love.

Transforming fire, ignite us with your fierce, bold flames and light the way to grace.³

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

² Ibid

³ www.seekerschurch.org