

*“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

In a small town, the volunteer fire department's telephone was answered by the policeman on duty, who would in turn sound the fire whistle to rally the volunteers to duty. One Saturday morning the town chief of police had just come on duty when the fire department phone rang. He picked up the phone and said, “Fire Department.” A voice on the other end of the line frantically said, “Send the fire truck!” Then the caller immediately slammed the phone down. The chief didn't know what to do. In a few minutes the phone rang again. Quickly he picked it up and said again, “Fire Department!” Again the voice cried, “Send the fire truck!” Again the caller immediately hung up. Realizing that someone's house was possibly at stake, the chief rushed outside and scanned the sky to see if he could see smoke and therefore send the fire trucks in that direction. He also devised a plan as to how to keep the caller from hanging up so quickly if she called back. Sure enough the phone rang again and he went running inside. Picking up the phone he quickly asked, “Where's the fire?” The woman on the other end screamed, “In the kitchen,” and slammed the phone down again.

Where's the fire? That would be an appropriate question from a fireman who needs to know where to go, or even from the policeman who stops us for driving too quickly. It is a bit more troubling when that question is asked by other people, not thinking about flames, but about passion or zeal. A young woman playing at an arts festival was told by the adjudicator: “You played well, but there is no fire in your music”. Or a young actor, trying out for a movie role is told: “Your audition is fine, but there is no fire in your performance”. A husband and wife drift apart because they feel the fire has gone out of their relationship, and they just can't seem to get that old ‘spark’ back again.

Where's the fire? Perhaps we need to ask that question in the church today, too. Are there times when it seems we have lost the zeal, the excitement, the enthusiasm for our faith and what David refers to as the *“the joy of [our] salvation”*? (Psalm 51:12, ESV) Have we lost our passion for the mission that flows from our lives as the people of God? Has the fire gone out of our worship? Or does that question describe our lives as God's people, not so much on Sunday morning, but throughout the rest of the week?

Gordon McLaughlin is a native New Zealander. He has written a book about his homeland entitled *The Passionless People*. He calls modern New Zealand "a sterile society." Could that be said of some congregations? Are we a passionless people, or are we caught up in that grand passion that motivated Jesus Christ and all the saints that followed him?

Today, as we celebrate the festival of Pentecost, we rejoice in the fire that God bestows upon us. When our text says that *divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them*, those flames were the sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. That's where the fire is for God's church. Our fire is from the Holy Spirit, who brings us the fulness of God's love and grace for us in Jesus Christ. As the Spirit works in our hearts and lives, He makes us aware of our sinfulness, but then also assures us of the forgiveness and life that we have through the Lord of Life. As the Spirit fills us, He gives us joy, excitement and enthusiasm which flow from the hope that burns within us. As He descends upon His church, the Holy Spirit gives us the spark, the flame and the fuel to be on fire for the Lord as children of God and His church.

When we look at Peter and the disciples in the book of Acts, there is no question of where the fire was—and it wasn't just those tongues of fire on their heads. It was the joy and hope that filled their lives and hearts. Of course, it took the power of the Holy

Spirit to get them all fired up for Jesus. It seemed so strange that these very people, who were eyewitnesses to the glory of the resurrected Lord were not immediately on that first Easter Sunday on fire for the Lord. They were actually very afraid; afraid that the Jewish leaders who had plotted Jesus' death would be after them next. They were not sure, even now, as to what they were to do, even though Jesus had told them: ***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*** (Acts 1:8, ESV)

The victorious, risen and ascended Christ kept His promise on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descends upon His church and fills His people with all His good and perfect gifts and blessings. And His presence has a very dramatic influence on the disciples. These once timid, uncertain, even withdrawn individuals are now on fire for the Lord. They stand up before the crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost (which had a very different meaning for those people than it has for us) and they begin to speak God's truth. The really surprising thing is that they began to do it in languages they hadn't learned before. But it didn't stop there. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they boldly go out and share the good news of that Saviour who gave His life to take away sin and its power over us. They wanted to tell people how Jesus destroyed the power of death in His resurrection. Even when they were commanded by the Jewish leaders to stop their preaching, they were so on fire for the Lord that they said: ***“we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”*** (Acts 4:20, ESV)

One of the things that we know about fire is that it spreads. Like the song says, *“It only takes a spark to get a fire going”*. (Pass It On) The major forest fires we have had in Canada in recent years were the result of just a small spark, but they consumed thousands and thousands of acres of forest. Fire spreads. By the power of the Holy Spirit, it spread in the church, too. As the disciples, on fire for the Lord, shared their hope and love in the Saviour, others began to be on fire, too. After Peter's sermon on Pentecost, the people who heard him ***“were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”*** (Acts 2:37, ESV) Peter leads them to the Saviour who died on a cross for them, and who rose again from the dead. Yes, he was on fire and 3,000 people were added to the church that day.

We also see the fire of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these people after Pentecost. We are told: ***“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”*** (Acts 2:42–47, ESV)

The fire of God's love and grace was in the hearts of those believers. It glowed and burned in their lives. So where's the fire today? A. W. Tozer, an evangelistic preacher and teacher wrote: *“God dwells in a state of perpetual enthusiasm. He is delighted with all that is good and lovingly concerned about all that is wrong. He pursues His labours always in a fullness of holy zeal. No wonder the Spirit came at Pentecost as a sound of a rushing mighty wind and sat in tongues of fire on every forehead. ... Whatever else happened at Pentecost, one thing that cannot be missed by the most casual observer was the sudden upsurging of moral enthusiasm. Those first disciples burned with a steady, inward fire. They were enthusiastic to the point of complete abandon.”* (A. W. Tozer in *Of God and Men*. Christianity Today, Vol. 37, no. 14.)

We need this same fire among us today. I know it is hard to be all fired up in these COVID days, unless we are fired up about the frustrations we feel as a result of all the loss and restriction we experience. But even in our isolation and separation, there are ways we can share our faith and hope in the Saviour, who poured out His lifeblood for us on the cross; who suffered and died because of all our sins, and who rose again in victory over sin, death and the devil. We can pray for ourselves, for our church, and for all people in need. We can show that we have a hope and peace in spite of all we see around us, because we know the victory that Christ brings for us. We can (and should) get up every day and think, ***“This is the day the Lord has made (Let us rejoice and be glad in it!)”*** (Psalm 118:24) Sunday morning brings special joy, for even though we aren't here together yet, we still gather together with our brothers and sisters in Christ to hear again that wonderful word of life and to join in praising God with joy and gusto.

The same Spirit who descended upon His church on that first Pentecost still is at work, as He *calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.* (SC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Article) He brings us the fire that burns in us with the zeal and excitement of faith in that loving, dying and rising Saviour. He gives us that fire that will spread beyond the four walls of the church. That Spirit-given fire will fill our hearts when we are dealing with our friends at school, or when we are at work, when we are doing our household chores or watching a hockey game with our friends. Our fire is in Him and in the Saviour who He makes known to us. Even if it is only a light in the windows of our homes right now,

may it always burn brightly in our hearts and lives! Amen.