

## **“This Place is on Fire”**

*Pentecost Sunday*

Acts 2:1-21

*[1] Welcome, Prayer*

[2] Power outages are the worst. Nothing reminds us more how much we rely on electricity than when it is not there. Last year, I was trying to teach an online Bible study in a partial power outage, with two members sitting in the dark, and another one in their car at a parking lot using public Wifi. Not ideal! Later I played online euchre with my parents, who also had lost power. At one point, Dad said his phone was running out of battery and he needed to plug it in, at which point Mom reminded him, that wouldn't help.

The worst power outage Katja and I ever lived through was three days long, in November during our first year of marriage. The first night, it was cute. We lit candles and cooked over a fire. The second night, when the temperature in the house dropped down to 50 degrees, we packed up the car and went to the hunting camp. A life without power was no life for us!

[3] Many people are powerless in this world. Because of poverty, people literally live without electricity and other common utilities. Spiritually, people also live in powerless situations due to racism, corruption, disfunction, depression, abuse and other brokenness. The pandemic changed how we experience everyday life – many lost the power of companionship. Some lost the power of a paycheck. Others lost the power of a community support group. How glad are we that the power of these relationships is being restored by vaccinations!

What if there was an even greater power we could tap into that would restore us? A power to enliven us to meet our daily battles? A power that came, not from money, electricity, gas or water, but from heaven? Would we “plug in”?

I have good news for you. The Bible tells us that real power can be found in the Holy Spirit, and the story in Acts 2 illustrates just how wonderful that is.

[4] Today is a church holiday called “Pentecost.” The AMP Bible explains, “Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks) was observed at the time of the grain harvest and the offering of the first fruits, and was one of the three great annual Jewish

festivals, along with Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths). Just as Jesus' sacrifice was the fulfillment of Passover, the coming of the Holy Spirit was the fulfillment of Pentecost."

Pentecost celebrated the first harvest of the year, a kind of springtime thanksgiving. Today Christians mark this day as the anniversary of the coming of our spiritual power from heaven, the descending of the Holy Spirit on the first disciples, and the birth of the Christian Church as we know it today. In a sense, we can all tell each other, "Happy Birthday!" because this is the day the church first got "plugged in."

[5] Try to put yourself in the shoes of the disciples for a moment. They had been through a whirlwind of events and emotions: angry crowds in the city of Jerusalem, crucifixions, the loss of all hope as they watched Jesus die. Imagine the fear and isolation they felt. Then suddenly, there was an empty tomb, a vision of angels, and the appearance of Jesus himself, alive. They were thrilled! Jesus spent forty days with them, telling them that they must wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit. How strange to lose Jesus, see him again, and then not see him again, even though he somehow would still be with them. They didn't understand. I'm not sure I would have, either. The scripture says after they watched Jesus ascend into heaven, they stood around wondering what to do, until an angel told them, "Do what Jesus said – Go back to Jerusalem and wait."

Waiting is hard, isn't it? Waiting for the power to come back on can seem like an eternity. For the disciples, however, it was only one week between Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Let's look closer at what they were doing in this in-between time.

[6] First, they gathered together. The bible says there were about 120 people in all, including eleven of the original twelve disciples. (Acts 1:12-15) They organized themselves. They chose a successor to replace Judas. And most importantly, they prayed. They knew that waiting for the Holy Spirit, waiting on Jesus, was an active process, not passive.

A lot of people think the kind of waiting we have done in the pandemic – masking, social distancing, even closing the sanctuary to the public – is a useless kind of waiting. It is not. That waiting gave us time to consider new information,

to plan, and to organize. Every church meeting, including the church leadership team who frequently met on Zoom, has been for your benefit. Our prayer team started meeting every Tuesday, in the middle of the pandemic, to pray for you! Yes, things have been different, yet our waiting has had a purpose. So did the disciples' waiting.

The scripture says that early in the morning, they were gathered together in Jerusalem. It could have been a sunrise service – Peter started his sermon at 9:00 AM! (I'm glad we didn't have to be here that early today.) And as they waited and prayed together, a loud, rushing wind filled the room.

[7] I've been in some bad storms before that knocked out the power. The sound of wind is usually not a good thing; it reminds me of tornadoes. I believe the choice of words here is intentional – a tornado is a powerful storm that can completely rearrange your life, and that is what happened to the disciples. Their normal routine was interrupted. The festival they were celebrating took on a whole new meaning. Pentecost had been a festival of Thanksgiving; in this moment, it became something vastly more precious and memorable.

[8] The Holy Spirit descended on them like tongues of fire and allowed them to speak other languages, clearly, fluently. Even though I speak a little German, I've never had an experience when I could miraculously speak another language I didn't know. This event was so amazing, it confounded the crowd in Jerusalem. They all gasped and stared and wondered, “How is this even possible?” A few of them, having no better explanation, said that the disciples were drunk. That is a rather weak explanation.

[9] Peter seized the opportunity to step up and explain the source of this newly discovered power. He exclaimed, “Listen, all of you. We are not drunk. It's too early. No, what you are seeing is an actual prophecy come true before your eyes.” He went on to quote Joel, chapter 2, a description of the last days, when God

[10] “will pour out [the] Spirit upon all people,  
and your sons and your daughters will prophesy,  
and your young men will see visions,  
and your old men will dream dreams.” (Acts 2:17, NIV)

There would be signs in the heavens, the people would call on the name of the Lord and be saved. (Acts 2:20-21) Peter went on to tell them about Jesus, the crucified Son of God, who rose again and is the only rightful focus of our worship.

[11] Peter offered the first altar call, and the people were "cut to the heart." (Acts 2:37) They called out to Jesus and were baptized, and some 3000 people joined the church, just like that. (Acts 2:41) I would like to preach a sermon where 3000 people confess their faith in Jesus for the very first time. Of course, organizing the church would be complete chaos afterwards, but if the Holy Spirit can cause that kind of response, I'm sure God can work out the rest of the details!

[12] Let me ask you, what kind of power are you tapped into right now? Where are you plugged in? Are you looking to television, social media, food, or addictions to fill you up? Are you expecting to find life in temporary, earthly things? Friends, those things drain you of your power. There is nothing on this earth can save you or fulfill you the way Jesus Christ can.

[13] Peter said, "All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Acts 2:21) This is the truth that the Holy Spirit reveals to us. Understand, to call on a name is to invoke the power of that person and simultaneously admit you are powerless. Calling on the name of Jesus means believing, with everything you are, that he loves you and saves you, while you cannot save yourself. Calling on his name is worship, real worship, throwing everything at the feet of Jesus.

Do you know that power? Have you surrendered to Christ? Until you do, you cannot know the electric feeling of the Holy Spirit in your life.

[14] I believe the trouble today is, a lot of people are not plugged in to the Holy Spirit. Not many are looking to be amazed or saved. Not many are bowing these days. They are looking for a little spark, dragging their feet across the carpet for a poke, when they could be plugged into high voltage. Instead of looking for a Savior, they are just looking for someone else to blame for their troubles.

Instead, we need to realize how amazing it is that God allows us - us! - to tap into the power of the Holy Spirit. People, we are playing with fire. Consider this quote from Annie Dillard, in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

[15] Why do people in church seem like cheerful brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.

[16] It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return. - *Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 40-41.*

[17] The power of the Holy Spirit is real. Jesus Christ really is the Son of God. He really died on a cross to save you, and rose again to prove that his love is unstoppable. If you're feeling like a dead battery, maybe it is because you've never fully realized how this truth can recharge your life.

Have you ever accidentally touched an electric fence or a live wire? If you, like me, can live to tell about it, one thing you can say is, it's surprising! It is certainly disrupting, but maybe that is what we really need. Maybe our old routines were without power, and through this crazy upheaval of society, we can now really decide what is most important to us. As a church, if we want to stay plugged in to the power of the Holy Spirit, we are going to need to pray like the church is on fire. If the Holy Spirit descended on us, right now, the church would be on fire!

[18] So what are we to do? First, if you have not gotten down on your knees before God Almighty and made peace with Christ, do it. Let the Holy Spirit come on you. Make a decision. Don't ignore the amazing offer we have all heard today – everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!

Second, follow the example of the disciples, especially Peter. Let us be people of prayer. Not just the 15-second, “Good bread, good meat, good Lord, let's eat!” variety of prayers. I mean deep intercession, fasting, calling on the

name of Jesus Christ, individually and together. When we commit to prayer the way the early disciples did, we will experience the same power they found.

We can do this. We can be a church set on fire by the Holy Spirit. We can welcome all to a saving faith.

[19] Power outages happen by accident, but it is no accident if a church is plugged in to the Holy Spirit. It is the only way that we can fulfill our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ and transform the world. So let us be conductors, transformers, batteries, and motors for the kingdom of God. Plug into the Holy Spirit, and let the Spirit power your life. Amen.

Song: We Are The Church

Memory Verse: **Acts 2:21 (NRSV)**

*"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you felt a power or exhilaration surging through you?
2. Have you ever been in a group of people united in prayer? Would you like to be?
3. How did the disciples' waiting prepare them for the Pentecost miracle? What might have happened if they didn't wait as Jesus told them?
4. Peter preaches that Jesus died and rose again, ascended and sent the Holy Spirit to earth. How much of this do you believe? What difference does that make?
5. Will you answer the call to repent and be baptized (believe and join the community of faith in Jesus Christ)?

***Question for Pastor Eric? Email [eric.stigumc@gmail.com](mailto:eric.stigumc@gmail.com)***