

SERMON TITLE: "The Fire of Pentecost" (Pentecost Series #1)  
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:1-21  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: May 31, 2020 (Pentecost) at First UMC

## **INTRODUCTION**

As we've seen from the sanctuary decorations and the Pentecost Birthday Box, we've moved on from the Easter season to the time when the Holy Spirit came upon the Christian believers with a rushing mighty wind and tongues of fire. The Day of Pentecost is a celebration of God's life-giving power that filled the disciples long ago with such energy, enthusiasm, and missionary zeal that the church, in a sense, exploded into existence with a big bang.

Since Pentecost still holds great power to enliven our hearts and empower us to do God's good work today, I don't want to limit it to a one-day celebration. So I'm going to spread our Pentecost power over five weeks. Each Sunday we'll focus in on one aspect of that big day and what it means for us. So the themes of my June sermons will be "The Winds of Change", "The Power of Diversity", "The Promise of the Father", and "The Practices of the Spirit." Today, we begin with "Catching on Fire," or maybe a better title is "The Fire of Pentecost."

## **1--CITIES ON FIRE**

As we think about the fire of Pentecost, let's begin with what's most obvious to all of us who have been watching the news this week: cities on fire. Acts 2:1 tells us that "they were gathered all together in one place." That one place was the city of Jerusalem. So it's important for us to draw a connection to the fires that have been burning in Minneapolis, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and many other cities of America.

Most of the time, we Christians think of Pentecost as a happy celebration of when the Holy Spirit came and gave birth to the church. But I don't think any of us could call this week's fires celebratory. Rather, the fires in our cities have been sparked by extreme anguish over the tragedies of

horribly unjust African American deaths that repeat so often in our society that we can't even remember all the victims' names. While we recoil at the violence and rightfully condemn destruction and theft, we should not turn away from seeing the pain and the longstanding injustices that are at the root of these protests.

No, the fires in our cities this week are not fires of celebration, and maybe they weren't in Acts 2 either. The brutality of Jesus' death on the cross was still fresh, as were the deaths of many other Palestinian peasants who were executed by the authorities. There was a lot of oppression and anguish in their time too.

But, just as we learned after Jesus' crucifixion, our God of resurrection and Holy Spirit power has the ability to transform and use anything that gets our attention. God has the ability to use the fires in our cities to help us empathize with the depth of despair that is felt by so many who have been mistreated for generation after generation and century after century. These violent and destructive fires in our cities are not caused by God's Holy Spirit, and there is no reason to think of them as good. But we do have the choice to recognize in these fires the power of God's Holy Spirit to communicate with us, energize us, and mobilize us to act for racial justice and the better life God wants to create for all people.

## **2—HEADS ON FIRE**

This Pentecost story begins with cities on fire, and then it moves to heads on fire. Acts 2:3 tells us that the tongues of fire "rested on each one of them."

In the *Standard Examiner* newspaper on Friday, there was an article indicating that there had been a recent increase in young people stringing up hammocks on the rungs of electrical transmission towers along the Bonneville Shoreline Trail on the benches around the North Ogden-Pleasant View area. Rocky Mountain Power wanted to get out the message that climbing, playing, and hanging hammocks on these structures is extremely dangerous. "'Without getting too graphic,'" warned a Rocky Mountain

Power employee, the 230,000 volts of power could cook their insides and blow off their body parts.\* I doubt the Rocky Mountain Power spokesperson expected that teenagers would get this message directly from the newspaper article. But maybe they thought parents would read this story, get a little hot and bothered, and impress upon their young people to “use their heads.”

Heads-on-fire Pentecost style is thinking with the brains God already gave us. Pentecost fire also means allowing our heads to be filled with additional insight and new abilities. On that original day of Pentecost, God gave the disciples the ability to speak in many languages. This year, our Pentecost worship may not include other languages, but it includes backward language on the banner behind me. The white letters that look correct to you out there on the other side of this Facebook livestream are backward to us here in the sanctuary. The black letters that look correct to us here look backward to you. So we now have a “bilingual” banner, so we can all read the prayer “Come, Holy Spirit!”

Speaking the language-of-backward is only one of the new insights the Holy Spirit is giving us this year. Besides worshiping by Facebook, many of you have been learning how to use Zoom meetings for classes and fellowship. Over the past few months, I bet some of you have learned other technologies too—how to use your cell phones better, how to send text messages better, and maybe even how to send old-fashioned cards and letters in the mail. We all wish COVID-19 had never happened. But in this strange time, the Holy Spirit has most certainly been increasing our knowledge and abilities. The Holy Spirit is setting our heads on fire.

### **3—HEARTS ON FIRE**

Cities and heads on fire aren't always enough, though. We also need the fire of Pentecost to warm our hearts. No, I'm not talking about the kind of heartburn we get after eating spicy food. I'm talking about something more like the story of our Methodist founder John Wesley.

Wesley was born in England in 1703. His father was a priest in the Church of England, and John grew up in a very religious family. John was fortunate to be able to study religion at Oxford University.

After he graduated, he was ordained as a Church of England priest and was sent as a missionary across the Atlantic Ocean to the colony of Georgia. Despite his significant education and training, however, his ministry in Georgia didn't go very well. Many things went wrong, and John ended up sailing back home to London. He felt like a spiritual failure and was worried about the state of his soul. If he lived today, I'm sure Wesley would have been considered depressed.

Fortunately, John had a friend who invited him to a Bible study at a house on Aldersgate Street. There at that house, John heard a new teaching. It really wasn't new, but John heard it as if it were new. John heard a profound word of grace--that it wasn't his perfection of knowledge, skills, or deeds that would save him. Instead, it was the loving grace of Christ that would take away his sins and make him right with God. Trusting not in himself, but in Christ alone, is what would bring him spiritual peace and strength. That night, May 24, 1738, John Wesley went home and wrote in his journal that he had felt his "heart strangely warmed." It was that fire in his heart that lifted Wesley's spirits, caused him to embrace ministry in new and different ways, and empowered him to become the leader of the Methodist movement.

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus experienced a similar kind of heart-warming experience. Prior to that, they had been paralyzed by grief and fear that they could be killed like Jesus was. But after his ascension and a whole lot of prayer, their hearts were ready to receive God's infusion of power. Biblical stories and church tradition tell us that many of the original disciples were thrown in prison, tortured, and executed for their faith—so the risks they worried about were very real. But through the power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples came to a courage and determination that overcame their fears. They spoke out with such enthusiasm and vigor that they immediately drew detractors. But those accusations didn't stop them. They had a message to proclaim. They had a divine imperative that drove them forward against all odds. They had a Pentecost fire in their hearts.

I guess the question for us today is, “Will we allow the fire of Pentecost to burn in our hearts?” Will we trust Jesus and the Holy Spirit to cleanse us of sin and empower us for faith and ministry? So often we get hung up on ourselves. We wonder what people will think of us, and how they might judge us as uninformed, as hypocrites, or as being too pushy. But, if our hearts are warmed by the Spirit, we won’t be able to stop our faith from flowing out. We won’t be able to hide our light under a bushel basket. The Pentecost fire burning inside us will create a light—the light of Christ—for ourselves and others to follow.

In case you hadn’t noticed, our world has a lot of problems. God needs us to stand up with courage and lead the way. So I encourage you to let the fire of Pentecost burn in your heart.

### **CONCLUSION**

I guess the way to conclude this sermon is to circle back to the idea of fire in our cities. Maybe, if we allow the Holy Spirit to transform our minds and our hearts, we can get to the good places we need to be without the burning of our police stations and businesses. Maybe, if we willingly open our minds and hearts to God’s Holy Spirit, there won’t have to be a violent and destructive fire to get our attention to adjust our thinking and behaving. Let’s pray for the Holy Spirit to come. Let’s open ourselves to the fire of Pentecost.

\*[https://www.standard.net/news/government/rocky-mountain-power-reps-warn-of-hammocking-on-towers-above-north-ogden/article\\_b981ea95-1924-59ed-a09f-fd69f3727077.html](https://www.standard.net/news/government/rocky-mountain-power-reps-warn-of-hammocking-on-towers-above-north-ogden/article_b981ea95-1924-59ed-a09f-fd69f3727077.html)