

May 20, 2018 – Acts 2:1-21

Why tongues of fire? Have you ever wondered about that? Of all the things that God could have done on Pentecost, why send tongues of fire? Tongues of fire that rested on their heads? Tongues of fire that would become the symbol of Pentecost for us?

We see it all over our sanctuary today. The paraments. The banners. My stole. Fire and pentecost go hand in hand. Just like Christmas Trees and Christmas or Easter eggs and Easter. Everybody associates Pentecost with fire.

But it's kind of bizarre, when you think about it. I can only imagine what it looked like. A bunch of guys running around with their hair on fire speaking all sorts of languages. It's no wonder that the people who saw them were “amazed and perplexed,” as our text says. It was an amazing and perplexing event.

So why do it? Why do something so amazing and perplexing? Well, there is a fair amount of symbolism here. After all, fire is associated with the presence of God an awful lot in the Old Testament.

There's the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Which was a pretty amazing and perplexing time for Lot and his family. There's Moses and the burning bush. Which was a pretty amazing and perplexing time for him too. There's God descending onto Mount Sinai in fire and earthquakes. Which was a pretty amazing and perplexing time for the Israelites. There's God taking Elijah away in a fiery chariot. Which was a pretty amazing and perplexing time for Elisha as he watched him go.

Honestly, none of these events were any less amazing or perplexing than Pentecost morning. Many of them far more so. God likes to associate himself with fire. Miraculous, awe-inspiring displays of heavenly fire. But that fact itself is a little odd.

I mean, fire's a great thing if your roasting a hot dog or staying warm in the middle of a cold winter. But fire is also really destructive. Anybody who's built a large bonfire knows that it's good to be a little scared of the fire. And anybody who's seen the charred remains of a house or a car or a field or a forest after a fire knows just how dangerous it can be.

So does God want us to be afraid of him? Does he want us to be amazed and perplexed by his wrath? Well... yeah, kinda. I mean, there's a reason why we talk about the fear of the Lord. Moses tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4 that it was good and appropriate that they were afraid when God descended upon the mountain in fire, “*For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God,*” he says.

God set the mountain on fire, in part, to remind them of the consequences of their sin. The Lord our God is a jealous God. He doesn't tolerate competition. When you flirt with other gods he gets angry. When you cheat on him with the things of this world he will burn you. And when you leave him for the temptations of the enemy, there won't be anything left except charred remains.

And I don't mean that simply as a metaphor. That's exactly how the Bible describes the end of the world. The entire universe will simply be consumed by God's fire. Everything that is sinful. Everything that has been touched by sin. Everything that has fallen under sin's curse. All of it will be burned.

So now, I ask again, why tongues of fire? Is this really the message that God wants to communicate? That just as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. Just as Mount Sinai was engulfed in flames. Just as Moses and Elisha saw the fire of God and were utterly terrified by it. So we too should see the fire on the apostles' heads and know that God's destruction draws near?

Not exactly. Because, here's the thing. Think about all of those events. Yes, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. But Lot and his children were saved.

Yes, Moses saw a burning bush. But the fire didn't consume Moses. In fact, it didn't even consume the bush. It was there so that God could send Moses to save his people.

Yes, the Israelites saw the fire of God on Mount Sinai and were afraid. But God made Moses a prophet and a mediator so that they didn't have to enter the flames. So that Moses could deliver God's saving Word to them.

Yes, Elisha saw the fiery chariot of God. But he saw it because, after years of sending Elijah on some of the hardest missions a prophet has ever had to undertake, God was blessing him with the gift of eternal life without even having to experience death.

You see, every time the fire of God appears in the Bible, sin gets destroyed. But every time the fire of God appears in the Bible, God's people are also saved. And that's exactly what happens on Pentecost morning.

Those tongues of fire are part of a message from God. A message we actually hear from St Peter and the prophet Joel. And he points out what the day of the Lord is supposed to look like.

There will be wonders in the heavens. Like, say, heaven opening and a dove descending and the voice of God declaring, "This is Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased." There will be signs on earth below. Like, say, people being healed and miraculously fed and raised from the dead. There will be blood. Like that of a man being crucified. And the sun shall be turn to darkness. Just as it did at the hour of Jesus' death.

And now, there is fire. Tongues of fire on each of their heads. And the crowd of people who stands before them? Not long ago they cried out, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

And now, they're probably wondering... What is God going to do? Is he going to consume them with that fire? Burn them until there's nothing left? Burn them just like he did Sodom and Gomorrah?

No. Because this is the day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

For the people of Jerusalem that day, it wasn't just a day of fire. It was a day of water too. A day of baptism and repentance and rebirth. A day in which that old Adam who cried out "Crucify him!" wasn't burned. He was drowned. And then resurrected from the dead.

You see, that's how God works. That's how he's always worked. The fire of God destroying whole cities is also the fire of God to save God's people. The water of God to destroy the whole earth in the Flood is also the water of God to save God's people. The death of God's Son on the cross to pay the punishment of our sin is also the resurrection of God's Son to save God's people from their sin.

God destroys. And then he saves. He's done it throughout the Bible. And he's done it for you too.

And it's terrifying. It's terrifying to put yourself in the hands of an almighty God. It's terrifying to look at yourself in the mirror of God's Law and realize without a shadow of a doubt that you aren't worth saving. It's terrifying to throw yourself on God's grace. And know that there's not a thing that you can do to convince him of your worthiness.

It's amazing and perplexing to see the Spirit of God come down. Because you can't see the salvation of God without also seeing the wrath of God. You can't see the empty tomb without also seeing the cross. You can't see eternal life for the new man God has made inside you without also seeing the death of the old man inside you that God has drowned.

Which is why we rest on those words. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” We rest on them not because God needs to hear us call out to him. He doesn't crave our worship or devotion.

No, he says that to us for our benefit. So that when the world seems to be nothing but blood and fire and smoke and it looks like we're going to be consumed by his wrath. We'll know without a shadow of a doubt that the day of the Lord has already come. The day of our redemption has already come. And it is a great and magnificent day.

Because just like those disciples, God's Spirit has been poured out on us. And we walk around with tongues of fire on our heads. Not literally, of course. But we accomplish the same purpose.

We tell people of God's Law. We warn them of his wrath. We remind them that he is a consuming fire. A jealous God.

And then we tell them of God's good news. Of salvation through His Son. We assure them that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. No matter how amazing or perplexing that might be. Amen.