

Playing with Fire  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
June 5, 2022 – Day of Pentecost  
Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-21

*“Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,  
and lighten with celestial fire.*

*Thou the anointing Spirit art,*

*Who dost Thy seven-fold gifts impart...”<sup>1</sup>*

Did the writer of this ancient hymn *really* know what he or she was praying for? Does ANYONE really know what they are praying for when they invite the Holy Spirit into their lives? To do so is to play with fire, in the most literal sense of the phrase. Fire is something which requires a great deal of respect. Yes, it can be life-giving. But one misstep, or one puff of wind blowing the wrong way can easily turn it from a useful thing into something very destructive. When we talk about the fiery aspects of the Holy Spirit, whose gifting we mark on this fiftieth day after Easter. Once it enflamed the hearts of the disciples and the crowds who overheard them, the end result was a lot like the emergence of new growth after a forest fire. That there is any sort of new life emerging in the aftermath of a fire can be hard to see amid the burnt ruins of the forest, if we’re not looking for it intentionally. Someone who once hiked in a recently burnt area of Montana describes it this way:

“... The charred remains of spruce, lodgepole pine, and fir were all that I could see. Burned sentinels of formerly majestic trees rose ahead and above us, and those no longer standing littered the forest floor as if some great force had

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<sup>1</sup> “Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire.” *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), 504.

arbitrarily tossed them and let them lay where they fell... Amidst the desolation, I began to see that life was everywhere, pushing upward in infinite detail, where, previously, my vision had been limited only to what was most obvious to the eye. I caught a glimpse of a mule deer, drawn to the open terrain by the lush, waist-high vegetation now growing in the sunlight. Fireweed, a lovely plant with lavender and pink flowers that grows in just such burned-over land, was everywhere around us. How had I missed it?... I had not seen it in part because I had not paid attention to the moment and to the larger, more complex picture it contained. Focusing only on the blackened trees straight ahead and above me, I failed to see the profusion of life flourishing right beneath my feet... Indeed, flourishing was everywhere, in stark contrast to the all too evident reminders of what had been, on the surface, a very challenging time for this forest ecosystem.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, signs of flourishing were very hard to see in ancient Mesopotamia in the years following one of the biggest floods of all time. You know the one, where God made it rain for 40 days straight, and Noah, the designated survivor, built an Ark and brought an entire zoo on board, without asking his wife’s opinion first. That flood had wiped out everything, from crops and homes to people and livestock. Presumably it took a very long time to rebuild afterwards, and the story that eventually got told about it was that a particularly frustrated God had done it to wipe the human slate clean. For some of the people in the generation or two which lived immediately after it, that epic flood was

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Harkins, “Transition, Resilience, and Fireweed.” <http://www.atthispoint.net/articles/transition-resilience-and-fireweed/232/> [accessed June 1, 2022].

embedded in their living memory, or perhaps had been a favorite tactic to convince children to behave: “Go to sleep, or God will flood this bedroom!”

Underneath that, however, is a real anxiety over how this community would make a name for future generations to remember. It’s more than just a legacy that they’re concerned about. They’re also nervous about what this new, walled city that they’re building, with the brick and pitch skyscraper at its center, communicates about the character of the people living there.<sup>3</sup> They may well have intended that this skyscraper would tell their descendants that their greatness extended all the way to heaven. What it ends up being instead is the exact opposite. It’s a symbol of human arrogance, as well as a monument to a society where there is no room for individuals to grow and flourish along with their myriad gifts.<sup>4</sup> The walls these unnamed people are building only serve to separate themselves from the rest of the world, and acted in direct opposition to God’s desires for people to spread out. And their reward is exactly the opposite of the security blanket, which the city, with its walls, high tower, and uniformity, was intended to create: “So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.” (Genesis 11:8, NRSV)

Oops.

They did exactly what the Montana hiker had started to when he looked up at the destroyed forest, and saw only the charred remains of the trees. They were able to focus only on making a name for themselves. As a result, they missed the important

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis Bratcher, “Commentary on the Texts: Genesis 11:1-9.”  
<http://www.crioice.org/lectionary/YearC/Cpentecostot.html> [accessed May 30, 2022].

<sup>4</sup> Shai Held, “The Babel story is about the dangers of uniformity.”  
<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/the-babel-story-is-about-dangers-uniformity> [accessed May 30, 2022].

stuff, the signs of life they could only find by looking down at one another. Instead, they looked up at heaven and thought the best way to access it was by building a skyscraper. What they didn't realize was that the skyscraper, as big as it may have been by their standards, was nothing at all by *God's* standards. And maybe, just maybe, God really intended for them to focus on something other than what they could build with their own hands and wills. That something was, and still is, authentic relationship with God and with one another. Living into those relationships requires breaking down walls, not building them. Whether they are literal walls made of stone and mortar, or figurative ones constructed from our own pride, anxiety, and/or need for control, they have the same function of getting in the way. And that is the point of this story: that the very things which drive us to define the world in our own way result in a world where communication and authentic relationship are impossible.<sup>5</sup>

In many ways, the Jerusalem community we encounter in the reading from Acts is in this same place, where communication and being in relationship with God and with others is difficult. The difference between them and the people who abandoned the Tower of Babel is, their scattered languages are the barrier, both between themselves and their ability to receive and understand what had taken place with Jesus' death and resurrection several weeks earlier. If you keep reading Peter's speech beyond what we've heard of it this morning, you'll find that what he does is to make clear to all the people gathered there that "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified... for the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:36, 39).

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is meant to be the beginning of undoing the boundaries of culture and language which stand in the way of God's intentions for human diversity, and unity of purpose amid our diversity. It enables the crowds in Jerusalem to understand what the disciples are saying about God's deeds of power. It enables Peter to elaborate on what's happened, to teach the crowds, and invite them to repent and be baptized. And it enables us, as their spiritual heirs, to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. It empowers us to take what we do here – how we are fed here – out into the world, to see the signs of life that are out there, and to use them in service of God's ideas of what human flourishing is.