

The Saga of Holy Fire

Meta

Date: May 19, 2024; Feast of Pentecost

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Opening

More than any other year, I have waited for this day to come—the Day of Pentecost. I can't fully explain it, but there's been an unusual longing for this day, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church.

'I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!'¹ Read five contemporary commentaries on that statement by Jesus and you'll likely get five different interpretations. He was referring to final judgment, he was speaking about the ultimate claim of his kingdom, and so on. Read *the church fathers* on this verse and you'll hear several say, 'our Lord was speaking of Pentecost.' And Jesus said, 'I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!'

How great was our Lord's longing that the Holy Spirit would baptize the nations with his fire!

Theophanies of Fire

There's a story here, too. It's an old story, the story of God's desire to cast fire on the earth—the fire of his Holy Spirit. To find that story, all we have to do is see how God revealed himself in the figure of fire—and why. For the scriptures disclose a story within the grand story, a saga of holy fire, we might say.

All good stories begin with a place, a world, rightly ordered when something terrible goes wrong to throw everything into disorder. Here we might return to the earliest story in Genesis 1-3, but the fact is that this pattern happens over and over. The world is rightly ordered and then everything is thrown into disorder, into chaos.

That's the pattern after God restored his world after the flood with Noah. God re-created his world with Noah and his family. After the flood subsides, humanity is literally reborn through Noah and his three sons. From Noah's lineage, clans were formed that became nations. Genesis 10 is a record of their descendants, a chapter also called 'the table of nations.'

And what do the nations do? They try to build a mountain together. We call it the Tower of Babel, but it really was a substitute mountain. Humans attempting what only the Creator God can do; human

¹ Luke 12.49

beings, now gathered as a family of nations, seeking to climb to heaven and enthrone themselves as gods.

In his judgment, the Lord confused their languages and dispersed the nations over the face of the earth. But like Eden, the judgment was also mercy. The Lord's exile, the Lord's discipline is an instrument for a future redemption.

Meet Abraham

Well, the nations are thrown into disorder after Babel and here we are again. How will God restore order? In Genesis 11, the world descends into chaos after Babel; in Genesis 12, we meet Abraham. Abraham, called out from the nations to be the father of many nations. Abraham has the word of prophecy he'll be the father of many nations; that he and his descendants will inherit land for their home, but Abraham is childless and roams like a nomad. That's where this saga of holy fire begins, right after the disaster of Babel. God commands Abraham to make sacrifices, then puts him to sleep. And in the midst of great darkness, Abraham wakes up to behold a flaming torch, a smoking pot passing through the sacrifices he made. It was the very Spirit of God appearing as holy fire, confirming that God would keep his promise. He would restore the world through Abraham's line.

Meet Moses

When God appeared as holy fire before Abraham, he prophesied the long captivity in Egypt, which brings us to Moses. Moses was being a good son-in-law, shepherding Jethro's flocks, just doing a good day's work when he came to Mount Sinai. And there Moses saw holy fire—a bush burning, though not consumed; the burning bush speaking, calling him by name. 'Moses! Moses! You're standing on holy ground! My people are enslaved in Egypt. Their home is with me. Go before Pharaoh and tell him my people are leaving Egypt. Bring them back to this same mountain to worship me.'

After ten plagues and a mighty exodus, Moses leads them out of captivity and what sign leads them on—a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night! And Moses follows the sign of fire, bringing Israel to Mount Sinai, where he had seen the Lord himself in holy fire. But when Moses returns to the holy mountain with Israel, holy fire has spread. No longer a single bush aflame, but the entire mountain was smoking. The mountain burning with the glory of God, though not consumed. 'Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.² Israel could ascend that mountain just as easily as you and I could ascend a volcano actively erupting. And yet, one man was called to ascend there. This was the holy fire Moses entered for forty days and forty nights.

In the midst of the thunder, the lightning, the burning mountain, God revealed his wisdom in ten words. Ten words of wisdom we know as the Ten Commandments. Never forget the Word of God is revealed with the awesome glory. God was restoring the world again, ordering one people according to his holy wisdom and his holy worship. God was making Israel his altar on earth, but not for Israel's own sake. Israel was lead along by holy fire so they would be a light for the nations, that the glory of the Lord would fill all nations over the whole earth.

Before we leave Mount Sinai, we must recall that it was here that God began redeeming the disaster of the Tower of Babel. Mount Sinai was God's answer to the disaster at Babel.

² Exodus 19:18

The Lord not only gave his wisdom in the Ten Words, he gave Moses instructions to build a tabernacle, the tabernacle that would become a Temple.

It is not only the familiar part of that story we know and love, that Israel was led out of Egypt and through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Not only this! No, the glory, the clouds, the smoke, the fire they witnessed on Sinai was now coming upon the tabernacle. Whenever the pillar of cloud moved, they had to break down the tabernacle and follow the Spirit of God. The tabernacle was Mount Sinai on the move.

Inside the tabernacle and later the Temple, the Lord commanded a lampstand to be lit, always burning with holy fire. It was God's way of saying, 'let there be light' once again. And yet Israel still couldn't come in because she wasn't made holy. Only her priests could light those lamps. Only priests could make the fires that would consume sacrifices on those altars. Not even Moses—the great tabernacle builder, the prophet upon whose face the glory of God shone at Sinai—not even he could enter the tabernacle when the glory of Lord descended upon it.³The holy fire of God was leading his people on, he was in their midst, but still they had to keep their distance.

Meet Jesus, the True Light of the World

Oh, but thanks be to God, in this saga of holy fire, 'the true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world.' And then the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. And we beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

When the Word became flesh, he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the body of the Virgin Mary. The same Spirit that hovered over the waters in creation, the Spirit of God revealing himself in cloud, lightning, and fire; in the burning bush, on Mount Sinai, in the tabernacle, in the Temple, now dwells inside the body of Jesus. And why did God the Son take on a body? To die for us? Yes, keep going. To rise for us? Yes, keep going. To prepare our bodies to become his holy Temple? Yes—that's the goal of his Incarnation, his death and his resurrection. That we could have by his awesome grace what he has by nature—the holy fire of God—the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. Not outside us so that we are spectators, but that your heart becomes the altar, the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, where holy fire burns and dwells.

Oh, can you hear how deep the cry of our Lord Jesus is now? 'I came to cast fire on the earth and would that it was already kindled!' He was crying out that we might receive in ourselves what he was given in his Incarnation—the Holy Spirit dwelling in our bodies; that your body would be his holy Temple.

You see, Jesus was preparing his disciples for holy fire, not just at the end of his ministry, but from the *beginning* of his ministry when he preached the Sermon on the Mount.

'You are the light of the world....No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all.' Jesus was preparing them for Pentecost from the very beginning—it was his goal that holy fire burn on the altar of our hearts; that we would become—both individually and collectively—a house of holy worship.

³ Exodus 40.35

The Day of Pentecost

And when the Day of Pentecost comes, it is no small sign that flames appeared over the heads of the apostles. That which burned before Abraham's eyes, which spoke to Moses, which led Israel through the wilderness, which conceived Jesus in Mary's body, has now entered and baptized the bodies of the apostles with holy fire.

How else can we understand Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost than this? The Holy Spirit lit his heart with holy fire. The Spirit came to dwell within Peter with his very self, and Peter put that light on a stand to give light to all nations.

When Luke tells us the names of nations, it's no minor detail. On the Day of Pentecost, Luke makes sure we know who was there:

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

You know what that list is? A table of nations. Because God desires that his Holy Spirit tabernacle in the hearts of men, women, and children of all nations.

All that was lost in the fall, desecrated by the nations descended from Noah, at Babel, and ruined in so many other eras of history, all of that is being redeemed on the Day of Pentecost. Sinai was never God's final answer, his ultimate work to redeem the world. The tabernacle and the Temple were never meant to be his permanent dwelling place. No, all these things were preparations for the Holy Spirit to make his home in our hearts. He is God, the Lord, the Life-giver. He is the one who descends with holy fire.

Our hearts were made to be a hearth for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descends on the altar of our hearts that our hearts would be like the burning bush, burning though not consumed. When the Spirit descends on our hearts, it is God saying 'let there be light' again!

Set Afire in a Hard-hearted World

We are called to find our place in this saga of holy fire. For the story is unfinished. The wonder of Pentecost in the Church is that it has a beginning, but there is no ending. It is no memorial, no commemoration, it is no special event comparable to others. The world is always threatened by desecration, and God the Holy Spirit is always working redemption from disorder and chaos. That's one reason I've called us to prepare for this day through prayer. Not that we would have some grand emotional experience, but that we might have a new outpouring of holy fire in our hearts and in the world.

And one of the greatest threats I see in America and beyond is of the greatest threats across the nations is right now? Cold-heartedness. Hard-heartedness. You can hear it in the way people speak with one another, the disrespect they show to one another; how insults have become commonplace. You can see it in the broken friendships, broken families. The way relationships abruptly and casually end.

Yes, we ought to look at systemic reasons to social ills, to be sure. But for all the words that are written, spoken, and shouted in our time, so very few are speaking about the heart. Remember the wise words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn:

The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts.⁴

And so the answer to all our disorder and discord will not come through political parties or states or classes or better education or a better economy. We need Pentecost. We need God to cast holy fire on the altars of a billion hearts, and would that they were already kindled.

So how do we take our place in this story? Worship, most of all. Come worship with the saints who are invoking the Spirit's presence. The Holy Spirit descends on bread and wine and on the saints of God at every Eucharist. Some have called the Eucharist our permanent Pentecost. Don't worry about emotions when you receive the Eucharist; focus on faith and belief. Ask that you would receive the Eucharist with love and gratitude.

Secondly, seek his presence continually in the altar of your heart. Ask the Lord's help to *get out of your head*. We try to figure out our problems, which inevitably means placing faith in our own logic and strength. And that just leads to self-interest and guarding our ego. Just admit your helplessness and ask the Spirit to descend into your chaos and disorder, whatever that may be, and make things new. The Holy Spirit pours out grace to the humble—the grace of peace, the grace of comfort the grace of joy.

The Holy Spirit is our Guide, so ask him to teach you how to live more from the heart; how to keep watch over your heart, to repent from the heart, how to give attention from the heart, how to listen with your heart . In the prayer of St Augustine we've been praying, we ask, 'Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy. Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy. Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I may always be holy.'

Pentecost has begun but thanks be to God, it will not end! Pray that it will increase within you, within the Church, within all nations so that this world would be covered with holy fire, aflame with love for God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956*