

BRUSH FIRES

Acts 2

The Day of Pentecost

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My spirit has been burdened recently. I am usually an upbeat, optimistic kind of guy, but I have been feeling discouraged. It is not because it has been rainy and gray 19 out of the last 21 days. It is not because I have just been part of endless meetings at Annual Conference. It is not because the Orioles have been in a month-long swoon. Not at all. It is bigger than that.

Memorial Day was last week. This is an important day because we ought to remember and honor those who have given their lives in duty and to exhibit a profound thankfulness that they would be willing to make the supreme sacrifice for us. What it brings to my mind, though, is the sad fact that they had to make that sacrifice at all. It grieves me that so many, mostly young persons, are in cemeteries worldwide because humankind has yet to figure out how to coexist. Throughout history one war has led to another and the graves continually multiply. Will it ever stop? How long, O Lord, before the Prince of Peace comes in glory to bring your kingdom?

That is thinking generally. Specifically, I think about the atrocities in Syria; of North Korea working feverishly to develop bombs and missiles to deliver them; of Paris, Brussels, Manchester, and Egypt, and now, just last night, London. Hundreds of innocent, unsuspecting men, women, and children have been killed because some want to make a point that feels pointless. It is inconceivable that people would be so careless with life, and give it so little value. Yet, we experience that reality almost on a daily basis. The thought of it all takes the wind out of the sails of even a dedicated optimist like myself.

So, I have been feeling rather glum these past days, trying to imagine how any good can come out of all that is happening. I have wondered – what’s the use, what’s the purpose of what we do here? Then, in preparation for today, I read again the account of the Day of Pentecost, and it put the wind right back into my sails. I’ll tell you why.

The situation that day was not all that different from today. Last weekend was a three-day weekend. Well, for the disciples, it also was a three-day weekend. Actually, I don’t know if they had three-day weekends or not. I rather doubt it, but Pentecost was a big-time Jewish festival. It was celebrated fifty days after Passover and coincided with the wheat harvest. Entire families made a concerted effort to get to Jerusalem for the celebration. They came from all over the world. The city was packed and buzzing. It was

like Ocean City on Memorial Day, or Times Square on New Year's Eve, or Louisville for the Kentucky Derby. It is easy to picture their version of cookouts, family reunions and games with a little worship thrown in. All in all, it was a joyous time.

One group of people, however, was not joyous – the followers of Christ. Like me, they were in the dumps for several reasons. They were afraid, for one thing. Jewish authorities had arrested and executed Jesus, and those authorities did not feel much more kindly toward his followers. It was not the safest time to be a Christian in Jerusalem. Mostly, though, they were dejected. Less than two months earlier Jesus had been killed. They had given their lives to him. They had believed that he would usher in God's kingdom. They thought that he was the savior, the messiah, the Christ, the one who would make Israel whole again. But he had been nailed to a cross and put in a tomb. Oh, he had risen from the dead as he had promised. They had seen him; they all agreed. He said that he was going to heaven and would come again. They believed him, just as I believe that Jesus will come and bring God's kingdom to earth.

But the fact of the matter was that he was now nowhere to be seen, and they felt very alone and vulnerable. They were supposed to carry on the mission but had no clue about how to do that. The truth is, Jesus had come and gone and the world was carrying on just as it always had, and his followers felt helpless to change it. Sound familiar? So, while the rest of Jerusalem was out partying, they sat huddled inside feeling sad and hopeless. The future looked dim, indeed.

Then came the Holy Spirit. Sounding like wind and looking like fire, the Spirit came upon them. When the Spirit came, their fear left and they went among the crowds and began to witness. An amazing thing happened. Everyone understood what the apostles were saying. I say amazing because it was an international crowd. Many languages were represented. The believers spoke their native language. They were not multilingual. Their testimony should have sounded like so much gibberish to the foreigners gathered. It did not. The Holy Spirit translated. Peter was able to get the attention of a large gathering, and he proclaimed the gospel and thousands came forward for baptism. In an instant, this motley crew of discouraged believers became unstoppable evangelists, and the number of believers grew from a hundred or so to thousands that very day. Ultimately the number grew to millions.

Those early believers gained confidence in God's future after they received the Holy Spirit and witnessed the power of the Spirit unleashed. Before the Spirit came, however, they were guilty of the same thing I have been guilty of recently – discounting God.

It occurs to me that they were discouraged and afraid because they looked at the

task ahead of them and made the correct judgment that there was precious little they could do. Caesar dominated the world, and the Roman army was invincible. The Promised Land of Israel was no more than a poor vassal state of a foreign empire. Their own people, the Jews, hated them because they believed in Jesus. Idolatry was rampant. Immoral living was condoned. This was their reality, and they were supposed to go out and invite people to accept Jesus as the messiah and live according to his ways? Get real.

The believers thought there was precious little that they could do, and they were right. They had no chance, by themselves. Ah, but they were not by themselves. God was with them and, as Paul wrote, if God is for us, who can be against us. God was with them. They had forgotten that important point. The Spirit reminded them, stirring them up and making the impossible possible. Oh, all the world did not completely change that day. Fire did not consume the earth. It was a local brush fire casting light on the truth that God is working his purposes out and that the day will come when God's throne will be the only throne in the entire world.

The early believers lost sight of this truth, and I lost sight of this truth. I suspect that many lose sight of this truth because sometimes the opposition seems truly overwhelming. Sometimes it feels like the best strategy is to huddle in a room together, as insulated as possible from all that is around us.

These are the times that it is imperative to look for the brush fires. Every day we can read in the paper about someone who was murdered or brutalized. It is hard to miss. It is front-page news. What we might not notice is that every day there are believers operating soup kitchens for the hungry, advocates helping those who cannot read to navigate government systems and programs, churches providing shelter to the homeless on cold nights and hot days, caring ones lining up to give their blood to those who need blood. The brush fires are burning. We are experiencing a rise in anti-Semitism, anti-Islam, and anti-poor sentiments. It is discouraging. Yet, from this church alone, teams have gone to be among the Hopi people and the people of Nicaragua, Kenya, and Appalachia, and another team is heading out later this year to work among those devastated by hurricane Matthew. Every week volunteers collect, clean, display, and sell for a dollar or two clothes, toys, and household items so those on limited incomes can have what they need, and then the shop turns around and contributes those dollars to other outreach programs. The brush fires are burning. One woman out of every four is beaten by her spouse. Our heads hang. But wait. Shelters and support groups and legal aid are made available to them by those who care. The brush fires are burning.

Do you see where I am going with this? Undeniably terrible things are happening on a daily basis. It is not an overstatement to say that violence, prejudice, hate, and

godlessness are rampant. It is enough to make us weak-kneed. It is a fact. It is also a fact that in every circumstance there are also bands of disciples, small bands, often, but bands, nevertheless, bands of disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit teaching and demonstrating Christian love and caring and justice and healing. In every circumstance, there are bands of disciples speaking in every language proclaiming that Jesus is Lord of all, proclaiming that the world can ignore him, reject him, crucify him, even bury him but it is ultimately impossible to kill God or to out hate God's love. It just cannot be done. The Lord reigns and God's kingdom will prevail.

Oh, can you hear the rush of the wind? Can you see the tongues of fire? The Day of Pentecost is more than the historic birthday of the church. It is the promise fulfilled of the gift of the Holy Spirit, by which believers are empowered to light fires of God's grace anywhere and everywhere. Do not be discouraged. Do not be afraid. God is with us. We know how the story ends and it is a blessed ending, indeed.

Come, Holy Spirit, Come.