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## The Gift of Fire

### Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.



Have you ever received a gift you were not sure you knew what to do with? I suspect we all have.

- Garish ties that you would not be caught dead in...
- Rank perfumes or colognes that you would not wear for fear of dropping everyone in the room into a faint...
- Horrible pictures from some rich old relative that are suitable only for the attic.

There are some gifts we do not know how to handle.

Consider what would happen if someone gave you a gift of...fire. Fire is fascinating. On a winter's evening, we like building a fire, not just for the warmth, but for the chance to watch it do its work. On a summer's evening in the woods, we enjoy gathering around a campfire, *not* for the warmth, but for the sheer pleasure of being near it. Fire fascinates us.

So, OK, you'd be fascinated by it. But what in the world would it *mean*? Perhaps the early Christians wondered. After all, that was the Lord's first gift to the church on that momentous and earth-shaking Pentecost...*fire*.

You remember. The faithful had gathered there in that room near the temple in Jerusalem, 120 of them. They had been there for the better part of ten days

- spending their time in prayer,
- choosing another apostle to replace Judas who had recently committed suicide
- talking among themselves of the ministry of their Lord Jesus who had been taken up from them into heaven just a week-and-a-half before.

Just prior to his ascension, Jesus had told them to go into Jerusalem and not to leave the city until they had received the gift of which he had spoken to them earlier, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So they did.

They were gathered there to wait, not quite sure what this gift was all about. Yes, they had *heard* something about this Holy Spirit. During their meal with Jesus on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus had told them that it was necessary for him to leave them so that he might send them another *comforter*,

- another one who would *walk beside* them,
- one who would *encourage* them,
- one who would *exhort* them,

for all of those ideas were wrapped up in the name Jesus used to describe the Spirit...the *paracletos*, it is called in Greek.

And then, just before Jesus was taken up into heaven, he told them that they would receive *power*, a supernatural power, the Holy Spirit, who would drive them to the ends of the earth with the message of the Gospel.

Again, they did not understand.

Now, it is the Day of Pentecost – and suddenly, the group there hears a noise. It sounded like a windstorm...a hurricane...the sound of some tremendous force. But nothing was moved: no buildings destroyed, no doors slammed shut.

As they looked around to see what was happening, they noticed that above each head was what appeared to be *fire*... *fire* that simply sat there...the *fire* that would be Christ's first gift to his church...the *fire* that was the Holy Spirit.

A gift of fire.

I wonder if the disciples had any more idea what to do with a gift like that than we do. I doubt it. But to their eternal credit, and to our undying benefit, they did not think of possessing the gift; they let that gift possess *them*.

The fire was not at all what they *expected* – but was *exactly as advertised*. It proved to be

- a *comforter*,
- an *encourager*,
- an *exhorter* or *challenger*.

Look what happened to Peter. To say the least, this big fisherman had always been a brash fellow. He had been brash enough to leave his fishing business, to drop his livelihood when Jesus had said to him and his brother, "Come follow me and I will make you fishers of people." He had been brash enough to try things that were beyond human comprehension like healing sick people and walking on water. He had been brash enough to take a sword to the servant of the High Priest in Gethsemane despite being tremendously outnumbered.

But brashness has its limitations.

Peter was also *cowardly*...just cowardly enough to deny that he had ever *known* Jesus when confronted by a little servant girl. Yes, that fisherman was brash...but not brash enough in himself to do what he did on Pentecost.

Do you remember what happened next?

Peter was a changed man. The Holy Spirit had come upon him

- to give him *comfort* in the place of his fear,
- to give him *encouragement* in place of his questions,
- to give him a *challenge* in place of his silence.

Peter had the fire...or perhaps it would be better said, the fire had *him*.

But there was more to the fire that rested on those disciples there in that room in Jerusalem.

Jesus had promised them that the Holy Spirit would be a *guide* to them. After all, fire has always served that purpose. Until just the past century, the fire in lamps and torches was the only way one *could* be guided through the darkness. The lights we have in our own day are really nothing more than artificial fire...fire to light our way...fire to guide.

Peter was guided by the Spirit as he preached that morning. After all, he was a fisherman, not an orator. Truth be known, Peter had no business being up there in front of *any* folks, much less all those. But he *was*. And *did he come through!* 3,000 converts!

He had help...the guidance that came from the fire.

There is one thing more that must be noted about this gift of the Spirit that Jesus gave. Yes, it comforts, encourages, challenges and guides...but more than all of that, the fire is *power*.

Peter knew that power. He was no speaker. Just weeks before he had denied the Lord he was proclaiming, he faced a hostile and possibly murderous audience, but now, Peter *still* stood up to preach. And that preaching had power, the power of the *fire*, power that is evidenced by the fact that the church grew from 120 to 3,000 in just one day.

He probably did not understand it. I doubt that any of them did. The folks who heard him surely didn't, especially when they heard the message of the disciples in the languages of their own homelands. That kind of power is beyond human comprehension. But, understand it or not, the power...the fire...was *there* that day, and the fire has continued to empower the church through almost 2,000 years.

It is here today. It is still Christ's birthday gift to the church.

Unfortunately, we treat it as we would one of the horrible ties or smelly perfumes or ugly pictures. We do not know what to do with it, and, quite honestly, we seem to live as if we would just as soon not have it.

I suspect the reason is that we are afraid of it. It is almost as if someone had given us a caged beast. We would be terrified at what would happen if somehow that cage would be opened.

We read the account of what happened to those early disciples at Pentecost; we see what a tremendous effect the coming of the Spirit had on them, what an unbelievable difference was made in their lives; and somehow we know that if the Spirit came to us in that way, if the fire would take hold of *us* like it did them, things would never be the same. We are afraid of that.

And yet, secretly, inside, despite our fear, we somehow want that kind of power here.

We're not sure quite what to do with it, but I imagine that were you to ask folks what they hope will happen in the life of this community of faith we call Christ Church, we really do want the fire of Pentecost to burn in Exeter, New Hampshire.

It's just that we're worried that it might call from us more than we want to give and disrupt our comfortable lives – and so we fear it – and find ourselves filled with questions.

Like the disciples, we cannot answer these questions without laying a spiritual foundation for the answers we will get – without preparing for the Spirit’s coming in the same way the early disciples did. Their spiritual preparation took three forms:

- First, **they developed a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.**

They learned to *trust* him, to *count on* him, to *worship* him. They learned to *follow* him and be *responsive* to his commandments.

- Second, **they developed an air of expectancy.**

Jesus had told them to go to Jerusalem and *wait*, without doubt one of the most difficult commands he had ever called them to obey. But they obeyed, and they waited...with a sense of real *anticipation*.

- Finally, **they prayed...**

not just for a moment or two; they prayed for *ten solid days*. “*O Lord, give us that fire!*” And then it happened...the Lord’s first birthday gift to the church...the all-powerful Spirit of the living God.

We can have it too.

The Holy Spirit is a gift who brings comfort, encouragement, challenge, guidance, and, most of all, power. Will we treat the Spirit as a gift we would just as soon do without? Will we simply be fascinated by the Spirit as we watch others set on fire? Or will we pray, “Lord, give *us* that fire.” That is *my* prayer for this church...and I hope...I hope...it is yours.