

Homily, St. Andrew's
Day of Pentecost, May 15, 2016
Acts 2:1-11; John 14

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

As church was coming to an end last week, I suddenly became aware of the sad and difficult irony of current events and the sacred imagery at this moment in our church year. Today we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit with the Day of Pentecost, when “suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house... divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them...” Today we celebrate with wind and fire when we have seen the terrifying and destructive power of wind and fire that made it necessary for fellow Albertans to flee what, in some of the pictures and videos, looked like hell. Trees exploding, towers of fire on both sides of a highway, with thousands lined up, trying to escape. With fire and wind bringing panic and destruction to our province, it's hard to imagine how we can possibly celebrate something good... good news... a gift of God... coming with wind and fire? It's irony at its finest but it is neither easy nor funny.

The song “What a Day” by Reggae artist Tanya Stephens also celebrates, quite ironically, the power of fire. Stephens sings about all that is wrong with her world, how tired she is, of hunger, of animosity between races, of corruption and the judgements based only on looks. As the second verse nears its end, she gets to a kind of breaking point: “... But I got a vision of a whole other plane; where the spiritual can flourish again; I'm just awaiting for the fire to rain, burn down everything and start clean... oh what a day... when war becomes a thing of the past; and peace we will have it at last; and life is finally worth its cost; and oh, oh, oh what a day when men finally live what they teach; and love ain't just a concept we preach; and blood no longer runs in the street... oh, oh, oh, what a day!” I've loved the song for years but I hear it differently, more cautiously, with something of a gasp, this week. In the context of a lament about the serious difficulties faced in society, the vision of fire raining down to burn everything, and start clean normally sounds hopeful even if it is apocalyptic. But with pictures of actual embers from an out-of-control wildfire raining down on cars of actual people trying to escape what looks like hell... and the real, heart-breaking, and terrifying possibility that everything in their community could burn down. How could this be about hope? How could anything like this be related to God? How could there be any good news, any gift of God, come in fire and wind?

The point, I think, is that it's an image of God that includes immense and uncontrollable power. The good news is that the wind and fire we hear about in Acts today wasn't destructive. Indeed, the story describes it as productive, enabling the disciples to speak in different languages and thereby spread the Good News of God's love to people who wouldn't have understood their original language. Nevertheless, the coming of such power is not something to be taken lightly. If you play with fire, so the saying goes, you might get burned. If the power of God comes with wind and fire, well... it's worth being aware of the danger that poses, along with the incredible possibility.

If the ongoing events in Northern Alberta remind us of anything, it is our place and power in the world. We are clearly not in control of such immense power AND we are not helpless. We know that much more could have been destroyed, many more people could have been injured or died but they didn't because the immense power of God is also manifest in our building of safety infrastructure like fire fighting capability, technology, communications, and most importantly, in our power to love fiercely. We have seen everyday people doing their normal jobs become heroes. We have seen, again, the power of community coming together to take care of friends and strangers alike in times of terrible trouble. Greater than the power of destruction, we have seen, again, the power and determination of love to overcome.

This was the power of God that was in Jesus and it is the power Jesus promised would come to dwell in each of us and in the community of faith. In our passage today from Jesus' lengthy Farewell Speech in John, Jesus says: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these..." (14:12) Jesus goes on to explain that the same power of God that is in him, is coming to the disciples in the Holy Spirit. Like facing an out-of-control wildfire, facing God and living to tell the tale means recognizing that we are not in control and we are not helpless. Far from it, for Jesus says that "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do..." and greater works still. The arrival of the Holy Spirit today means we have unprecedentedly access to the power of God... the question is what we choose to do with it? What do we do with the fire of God within us?

Spiritual teacher and author Marianne Williamson once described the power of being a child of God: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

It is this kind of power... the power of light, the power of love, the power of God... that inspires and enflames us to do great things for the glory of God. This is what Pentecost is about... it is the day we celebrate the birth of the church as the means through which God works in the world. The power we receive in the Holy Spirit should make us a little nervous... it is a gift not to be taken lightly... if you play with fire, you might get burned. And yet shrinking away from it, denying it, only denies the piece of the glory of God manifest in us. Ignoring our light because of our fear that we just might be powerful beyond measure means that darkness wins. Playing small, shrinking into ourselves, withdrawing from the world does a disservice to all those who need light, who need love, who need God. We receive the Holy Spirit today not for ourselves but so that we can use the power of God, the glory of God, manifest in us, to live what we teach, for love be more than a concept we preach.

In just a few minutes, we will baptize little Kristina into the community of faith and the family of God. Alongside our reflection on the power of wind and fire, we also remember the power of water to save. It is, after all, water that we have been praying for most, especially in

Northern Alberta. Kristina is already a child of God but with this sacrament, she can grow up in the confidence of knowing it. As she grows, so much in the world will tell her that she is inadequate in one way or another, but by virtue of her baptism today, she will always know that as a child of God and she is meant to shine... she is meant to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous... just like each of us in our own way. She will never be in control of what happens but neither will she always be as helpless as she is today. With the breath and fire of the Holy Spirit within her, she can be powerful beyond measure, bringing light and life to her little corner of the world.

Such is the call to all of us today, as we too remember our baptisms and the ultimate dignity and worth that came with them. We are all children of God, meant to shine... meant to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous... May we embrace that power... the power of light and love... the power of God, within us and within our community. May we know the fire of God and remember that out of ashes, new life grows.