

Pentecost (RCL/A): “Dear Holy Spirit, Divine Flamethrower, Heavenly Spotlight”
Acts 2:1-21
May 23-24, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The unexpected appearance of fire inside the house alarms us. It’s a valid reason to call 911. When we ignite the gas burner on the stove, we expect to see fire. When we light dinner candles or birthday candles, we are not surprised by those small flames, because we initiated them. On the other hand, we do **not** expect to see fire when we’re praying.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them (Acts 2:3). I’m thinking those disciples on the first Pentecost were in some kind of prayer ecstasy, as positively profound as their despair had been on Good Friday. I don’t know, but I wonder if their communion with the Most High was so all-engrossing that they didn’t initially **notice** the fire over their friends’ heads. When I pray, my eyes are often closed.

The fire inside the Upper Room was accompanied by “*a sound like the gush of a violent wind*” that “*filled the entire house where they were sitting.*” (Acts 2:2) (How can you **sit** through something like that??) Fire and wind are signs of God’s awesome Presence in both Hebrew **and** Christian Scripture. Like smoke and storm, they are clues that God is present in power. In the Book of Exodus Moses’ attention is captured by a burning bush that is engulfed in flame but not consumed by the fire. God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush. The Israelites who escape Egypt are led through the desert toward the Promised Land by a pillar of **fire** by night and a pillar of **cloud** by day. Scripture describes Elijah being carried to Heaven in a chariot of **fire**. John the Baptist preached that Messiah would come and baptize with **fire** not water. John also preached that Messiah would

separate wheat from chaff on the threshing floor, gathering the wheat in his barn and burning the chaff with unquenchable **fire**. (Matthew 3:12)

At Bible study on Wednesday folks pointed out that fire is often associated with **punishment**, as in the fires of hell. But what if instead of burning **us** the Holy Spirit burns up whatever **separates, alienates** us from ourselves, our neighbors and God? What if the Holy Spirit's fire is like the controlled burn of a forest, ridding it of undergrowth that would serve as tinder in a major conflagration, creating an inferno that would be hard to contain? What if the fire of the Spirit works to separate the gold from the dross in our hearts, leaving behind what is precious and removing whatever clutters our lives or distracts our attention from love of God and neighbor? What if the fire of the Spirit illuminates our Way, becoming "*a lamp for our feet and a light for our path*" (Psalm 119:105)? What if the fire of the Spirit causes our hearts to "*burn within us*" (Luke 24:32), as the disciples from Emmaus experienced, impassioning us for God and God's work in this world?

My experience is that worshipers love fire ☺, for instance, lighting tapers during the singing of *Silent Night* on Christmas Eve and during the singing of the Exultet at the Easter Vigil. We use the flame of the Easter fire lit in our churchyard to ignite the Paschal candle, which in turn is the source of flame to light the tapers at the Easter Vigil. Is either the Easter fire or the Paschal candle flame diminished by being shared? The truth is: **light shared is light multiplied, not diminished.**

Think about it: the flame of one candle passed down the line can light **innumerably more** candles. Before Christmas and Easter worship, we look at past years' attendance so we have enough hosts and wine cups for everyone we hope to see. Despite our best guesstimate it's possible we **could** run out of hosts and wine. It's even possible that we

could run out of candles nestled in their little bobéches. But it is **not** possible that we would ever run out of fire. Fire can be extinguished, but it will never be diminished by being shared. Doesn't that sound like a God-thing?? "When we share we all have enough." God's generosity always outdoes ours. But God's generosity also **inspires** ours.

When Blake Anne is baptized this beautiful Pentecost weekend we'll pray that she receives the **gifts** of the Holy Spirit: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord, joy in God's presence. We believe the seeds of the **fruits** of the Spirit that Paul mentions in Galatians 5 will also be planted in the tender garden of Blake's soul:

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Generosity
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-control

These are the virtues that make life worth living and that are the marks of a truly Christian community that honors and **acts like** our Lord Jesus and doesn't just **talk about** Him.

I've gotta say, though, I don't think Paul's list is complete. I think he's missing some essentials of Christian living, and a couple virtues the Holy Spirit definitely delivers, including **courage** to witness to our faith, like the disciples on the first Pentecost preaching to the masses (including those who were recently shouting, "Crucify!"), like a youth in the lunchroom sticking up for the quiet kid being bullied, like the politician voting his or her conscience instead of opting for the electorally expedient option.

And **gratitude**, where's gratitude on that list? It's the Holy Spirit who enables us to **recognize** our blessings, **credit** God as the Source, and then compels us to **share** instead of hoarding. It's the Holy Spirit who convinces us that we are blessed to **be** a blessing, just as Israel was blessed to be a blessing to all nations by birthing a Messiah.

Anne Lamott is one of my favorite authors, because she has great spiritual insight, a sense of humor right up my alley, and wisdom born out of a lot of life's pain. Her faith talk is never glib. She shares her story generously and it's clear she's earned her creds through suffering. I think she'd agree that only the Holy Spirit enables us to see through the eyes of faith. The eyes of faith are **not** rose-colored glasses. The eyes of faith see clearly, even when the picture isn't pretty. The eyes of faith see suffering and seek to prevent or alleviate it. The eyes of faith see injustice and attempt to correct it. The eyes of faith see need and work to meet it. Anne Lamott talks turkey and gives the Holy Spirit all sorts of credit in her little 102 page book *Help, Thanks, Wow*. She writes:

[On your own] you can't have gotten from where you were – gripped by anxiety, tiny with fear – to come through to freedom, for God's sake. To have been so lost that you feel abducted, to feeling found, returned, and set back onto your feet: Oh my God, thankyouthankyouthankyou. Thank you. Thanks... [I]f we are lucky, gratitude becomes a habit.¹

If we are blessed, the Holy Spirit, divine Flamethrower, heavenly Spotlight, helps us see: not that the glass is half-full instead of half-empty, but that we are drinking from our saucer.

Amen

¹Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow* (NY: Riverhead Books, 2012), pp. 48-49.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham