

HOLY GHOST FIRE

*[Script for the sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark on May 15, 2016]
Pentecost – Confirmation Sunday – One Service Only, HCC, 10:30 a.m.
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.*

Scripture Reading – Acts 2:1-21 (Common English Bible, slightly adapted)



When Pentecost Day arrived, Jesus' followers were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Haddamites, and Higganumites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!" They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!"

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young will see visions.
Your elders will dream dreams.
Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.
The sun will be changed into darkness,
and the moon will be changed into blood,
before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*

[what follows is the script prepared for the sermon, but not the sermon as actually preached]

Sometimes a sermon title seems to come almost out of nowhere for me. That's been the case with today's sermon title: Holy Ghost Fire. I know that it has something to do with today's text, which is about the verbal and visual experience of the Holy Spirit (the Holy Ghost) on Pentecost, when Christians celebrate the birthday of the global Christian church. The **verbal** experience is about how the Spirit inspires and empowers Jesus' followers to tell the story of Jesus in every language. The **visual** experience is "flames of fire alighting" on each one of Jesus' 1st century followers. For Jesus' followers in the 21st century, there are three different kinds of Holy Ghost Fire.

The first kind is the fire of conflagration, like the massive forest fire that destroyed the town of Fort McMurray in Alberta, Canada. Some preachers of a certain persuasion have been known to plead with God to send Holy Ghost Fire on their adversaries, to destroy them.

The second kind of Holy Ghost Fire is the fire of glossolalia, which is just a fancy word for speaking in tongues. Some Pentecostal or charismatic Christians find that when they are "on fire" with the Holy Spirit, they can speak in tongues, experience healing, be strengthened in their faith.

Long ago, in what seems like a galaxy far away, I went with a busload of people to a chaotic and charismatic worship service in a Catholic church in Worcester, MA, and witnessed people "slain in the Spirit," speaking in tongues, testifying to healing.

Unlike the story of Pentecost in today's reading, the tongues that the worshippers in Worcester were speaking were unintelligible to the rest of us. On the other hand, I remember that this kind of Holy Ghost Fire felt and sounded very much like music, not like ordinary speech.

The third kind of Holy Ghost Fire is, to borrow from John Wesley and the Methodist tradition, the sensation of feeling one's heart "strangely warmed." This has been my personal experience of Holy Ghost Fire through the years. It's not a constant fire, but it does ignite in me from time to time a surprised sense of awe and gratitude.

Let me tell you about my most recent experience of this third kind of Holy Ghost Fire, the heart-strangely-warmed kind of fire. It has to do with the mundane task of finding and furnishing a three-bedroom apartment in Middletown for a six-person refugee family from Iraq.

Two weeks ago, our Middletown refugee resettlement coalition got word from IRIS that this family would be arriving on Wednesday, May 11. So a number of us on the housing team started looking for an apartment in Middletown. I contacted a property management company. Others scoured various online apartment listings. We were able to come up with only one apartment, which several of us viewed on Wednesday, May 4, just one week before the family's scheduled arrival. We concluded this apartment wasn't ideal, but it would be workable.

The apartment was on Spring Street in the North End, near the Macdonough School, which was a good location. It was only a two-bedroom apartment, with a living room with French doors that could be made into a third bedroom. So we visualized one bedroom for the parents, one bedroom for their 15 yr old daughter, and the living room as a bedroom for the three boys, 7, 5, and 3 years old.

There were other problems with the apartment as well. There were several layers of paint covering the original lead paint, which made the windows hard to open, and when we did open the windows, we saw paint chips in the sash. So even though the apartment met

the legal requirements for “encasing” lead paint, we were quite concerned about the possible presence of lead paint in the chips.

We found two other possible apartments through online listings, and contacted their property management companies via email and voicemail messages. We heard back from one company, and members of our team viewed that apartment on Friday, May 6; once the agent heard that we would be renting the apartment on behalf of a refugee family, they began finding all sorts of reasons why we couldn't rent the apartment.

So here we are, just five days before the family's arrival, with only one less-than-ideal housing option, still waiting to hear back from the other property management company we had contacted. We make an appointment to sign the lease Monday morning.

Joan Hedrick and I meet in the parking lot of the Cavanaugh company a few minutes before our Monday morning appointment to sign the lease for the Spring Street apartment. Joan tells me that just before she left home, she got an email message from the Robert White company, offering us the opportunity to visit an apartment on Pearl St. Joan and I strategize for a few minutes in the parking lot. We decide to hold off on signing the lease for the Spring Street apartment until we've had a chance to view the Pearl Street apartment.

Once several of us (Joan, Isabelle Segerman, Cherry Czuba, and Izzy Guy) have viewed the Pearl Street apartment, it's a no-brainer. This is the apartment we want. The agent who shows us the apartment puts me in touch with his manager, and he and I talk for a while on the phone. Luke—that's the manager's name—isn't concerned that this is a refugee family, but he is understandably concerned about their ability to afford the rent. So we talk some more, and we arrange for me to go to their office in Meriden Tuesday morning and sign the lease for the Pearl Street apartment. We contact our furniture people (who were prepared to deliver furniture and other household items later that day to the Spring Street apartment), and let them know that they have to quickly change their plans and arrange for delivery to the Pearl Street apartment on Tuesday.

On my way to Meriden Tuesday morning, I pick up checks from St. Vincent dePaul, our “fiduciary agent,” to pay for the first month's rent and security deposit. As Luke and I are negotiating the lease (which is complicated because the actual tenants are in transit somewhere between Iraq and Newark Airport), he mentions to me that his brother Zach has just bought the house next door to the Haddam church. And it dawns on me that Luke and Zach are Bobbie Eddinger's sons—Bobbie who had a longstanding relationship with the Higganum church, and who was struck and killed by a hit and run driver not long ago.

So I co-sign the lease on behalf of the Coalition and the refugee family and drive back to Middletown to help with deliveries of furniture, household goods, etc. etc. The weather is beautiful, the team is happy, and we begin setting up the apartment. I begin to feel a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes and a strange warmth in my heart. In the midst of all the ordinariness and stress of finding and furnishing an apartment, we begin to realize that something greater than us is happening here. It's a subtle, gentle Holy Ghost Fire. There's nothing adversarial or chaotic or charismatic about this Tuesday morning's Holy Spirit Fire. It's a heart-strangely-warmed gentle Holy Spirit fire. To borrow from Frederick Buechner, this kind of Holy Ghost Fire is kindled when our deep passion meets the world's deep needs. My wish and my hope for you who have been confirmed here this morning is that you will have experiences like of this Holy Ghost Fire: when your hearts are strangely warmed, when you discover that your deep passion has met the world's deep needs.