

# Sermon for the Day of Pentecost, June 4, 2017 - "Fire and Rain"

Day of Pentecost  
Sunday, June 4, 2017  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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## Fire and Rain

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of the risen Christ.

When Jesus' followers were together on the day of Pentecost, divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue of fire rested upon each of them. No matter who you are, it would be startling to have fire come rest on you. Even more so if you were Jewish, as Jesus' followers were, because throughout their history as a people, God's presence was often made known in fire. What did it mean that the fire of God was now resting upon them? What does it mean that God's fiery Spirit also rests upon us?

The presence of God has often been made known in fire. Here at Good Shepherd we experienced God's presence in fire at the Easter Vigil this past April. Such an amazing thing happened. A fire and a candle were lit in the midst of an epic thunderstorm.

This year was Good Shepherd's turn to host the community vigil and people were excited about having a huge bonfire here in this great backyard. The fire at the beginning of the vigil serves as a sign of the eternal presence of God. We light the Paschal Candle from it - this candle that remains lit throughout Easter and is lit at baptisms and funerals as a sign of the presence of the risen Christ.

We'd been preparing for months for this bonfire and candle lighting. Since late December people had been bringing their Christmas trees to be burned in the fire. That week, Reg Laursen stacked a really large number of trees into a huge pile. When he saw that there was rain in the forecast he enlisted my son Nathan to help him cover the pile with a tarp.

For a while on that Saturday, the sun was finally out and it looked like it would be a gorgeous evening for the bonfire. I was so hoping it would work; we needed a powerful experience of resurrection that night. The gray skies we'd had for weeks seemed appropriate for all the painful news in our state, our nation and our world. Many in our community were grieving this Easter, and some of them I knew would be at the vigil. I, too, was experiencing deep grief as I approached the first Easter since the death of my dearest friend and fellow pastor, Sarah. That week her husband had called to say he and the kids needed a change of scenery for Easter - could they come to Decorah? "Yes, of course," we said; but how would I preach resurrection with them here on Easter Sunday? At least they'd be here for the dramatic vigil, I thought, and Sarah's seven year old son Stefan would love the fire. We needed that fire, we needed that candle lighting.

But as we were preparing for worship that night, a thunderstorm rolled in and let loose. There was torrential rain and a massive amount of lightening. The other pastors and I thought there was no way the fire would burn and, even if it did, how would we light the candle from it and keep it lit? You wouldn't want the flame representing the presence of the risen Christ to get snuffed out. We started making

alternate plans.

Reg got that twinkle in his eye and encouraged us to give it a try. The fire lit and blazed powerfully and almost defiantly in the face of the storm. It was a huge, beautiful miracle. God worked through those trees, through Nathan and Reg. God brought fire even in the pouring rain.

Even when all looks hopeless, even when we are drenched in sorrow, God is present and working new life. That fire reminded us of that.

Then Don Berg got an umbrella and shielded Megan Buckingham as she carried out the Paschal Candle to light it in the rain. The rest of the assembly stayed inside to watch. The candle lit. Megan and Don processed inside carefully and the candle stayed lit. Lise Kildegaard captured beautiful pictures that tell the story. Little Stefan loved it.

It took a community tending the fire and the light, it took trust, it took a willingness to be uncomfortable - Reg, Don and Megan got both soaked and smoky. God worked through all of that to remind us of the presence of the risen Christ.

God's transforming presence has often been made known in fire. God spoke to Moses in a burning bush, God led the people of Israel out of slavery through the wilderness by a pillar of fire. When God gave Moses the law, the appearance of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the mountain; fire consumed the temple offerings. The prophet Elijah called down fire upon wet wood to show the power of God. The fire of God brought light and guidance in treacherous times. It was also a refining fire, burning away everything that chokes life and so sparking renewal - like the prairie fires we have here in Decorah.

Throughout the history of the Jewish people, God was made known through fire; God was present to the people in a very dramatic way. Yet only a select few people could access this fire - just Moses and a few select prophets and priests could approach it.

It is striking then, that on the day of Pentecost, the fire of God's Spirit was poured out upon all the followers of Jesus and upon all flesh - men and women, young and old. The transforming fire of God was given to all people. With fire and the rush of a mighty wind, God's Spirit was let loose upon the world.

And that same Spirit is poured out upon us. When we are baptized, the fire of the Spirit comes to rest on us and a candle is lit for us from this pillar of fire.

We now bear the fiery presence of God in our very beings. We are all glowing embers in the fire of God's transforming presence. All of us - Reg, Nathan, Don, Megan, Lise, each one of us - carry God's fire within us. We are signs that God is present and active in the world, bringing new life even amidst the torrential downpours of grief, climate change, terrorism and hatred.

Together we tend the fire of God's transforming presence, we light the candles, we keep the flame amidst the drenching sorrows of our world. Together we defy all the forces that would extinguish this fire; together we trust in God's presence even amidst the storms. At times we will be uncomfortable, at times we will get soaked and smoky; but this fire brings light, warmth, hope, change and new life and we are a part of it.

Look at you, glowing like embers.

Thanks be to God.

