

Pentecost Sunday B
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Jesus' Wish
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

It is often found on greeting cards for occasions like birthdays and graduations: the congratulatory salutation: "May your every wish come true." We usually associate the wishes mentioned in this greeting with big gifts like a trip to Disney World or some other cool location, or a new car, or achieving something big like getting your dream job or finding your soul mate; as birthdays and graduations are occasions where we tend to wish big as we end one year and begin another (at least when we are children) or when we graduate from school ending the season as a student and beginning the rest of one's life. These are times of celebration that commemorate both what has happened and look ahead to what is to come. And when you have accomplished something like going from 7 years old to 8 years old or completing your bachelor's degree, it is appropriate to wish big wishes. Children usually keep their wishes secret as they blow out the candles on their birthday cake. But graduates might talk for hours about the future they wish for themselves. Maybe you can remember some of your secret wishes from childhood, or the day you graduated or landed your first real job.

Have you ever wondered about what Jesus wished for? There aren't many references to Jesus' wishes in the Bible, but if you look closely at the Gospel According to Luke you will find a place in it where Jesus does say what he wished for. Turns out Jesus didn't wish for a once in a lifetime vacation. He didn't wish for a Fitbit, new car or an iPad or iWatch. What Jesus wished for was fire. His exact words, according to the author of Luke, are, "I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled."

This line from Jesus appears in a section of Luke's Gospel where Jesus was talking about his purpose, his mission. In that same section he talked about bringing division and other things that don't sound like the Jesus we prefer to hear from. So, what could it mean when Jesus wished for fire?

That is the question Episcopal priest, author and professor at Duke University Lauren Winner asked in her book titled *Wearing God*. She found a variety of answers to her question. One friend said Jesus was talking about his crucifixion, and there are some Church Fathers who thought the same. Others thought what Jesus was talking about was the love of God, and there are certainly Church Fathers who agree with that, including Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan in the 4th Century who wrote, "With it's fire, love makes whatever it touches better. The Lord sent this fire on earth. Faith

shined brightly. Devotion was enkindled. Love was illuminated. Justice resplendent. With this fire God enflamed the hearts of the apostles.” From there, Lauren wrote a lovely series of reflections on fire, how fire provides warmth and comfort, and is powerful enough to destroy. Yet what it destroys, like the forests of Yellowstone National Park, often grow back renewed after the fire, for there are some trees that only germinate during the intense heat of a fire. It is fire, in such a case, that brings new life. All this, Lauren came to understand, is God.

So, perhaps the Love of God was what Jesus was referring to when he wished for fire. Only this time God’s Love was embodied in the life-giving Holy Spirit or Advocate, like we heard in the readings this Pentecost morning. We may be quite familiar with the story from the Acts of the Apostles we heard in our first reading, the one where Jesus’ followers were in a house together and suddenly there was a violent wind and those mysterious tongues as of fire settled on each of them. It’s a dramatic event, full of imagery and meaning, and the author of Acts, who most scholars believe is the same person who wrote Luke’s Gospel, certainly captures our attention.

Images of wind and fire go way back into the Old Testament and are references to the Presence of God. Think of the burning bush where God spoke to Moses, and the pillar of fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt and served as protection as well as a guide. The author of Luke and Acts may be using those images to try to convey that something deeply significant was happening in this event, that God was up to something, something God promised a very long time ago. Something that God started in Jesus and finally brought to fruition on that Day of Pentecost. Something we heard Peter hint at when he referenced the prophet Joel saying the day would come when God’s Spirit would rest on all people and by all, God means all. NO discrimination. All genders. All ages. All races. All levels of experience and economic status. All people will be deeply connected with God and will, according to Joel, prophesy, all people will tell of the Love of God.

That is the promise of God; God promised a new way of being present with people: all people. It’s a promise that goes back to Abraham when God promised Abraham’s descendants would be the ones to help all the people of world get to know who God is. It’s a long story, one that leads us to that Day of Pentecost through the story of the Exodus. Remember, exodus is the story of God rescuing God’s people from slavery in Egypt, called the Passover. It’s a story that continues to be an integral part of Jewish life to this day, and it was just as integral in Jesus’ day. The celebration of the Day of Pentecost was so-called because it is 50 days after Passover. Historians tell us Pentecost was the Jewish celebration commemorating the day their ancestors

received the 10 Commandments from Moses supposedly 50 days after their escape from Egypt. It was the moment they were given an important tool or resource, enabling them live the ways God intended so they could show the world another way to live, God's way.

But that was not the end of the story. As those 10 Commandments turned into a larger body of rules called the Law, we saw that rules without spirit often are not life-giving and instead can be used to try to control and manipulate people instead of empowering and enabling them to grow closer to God and each other. Rules with out Spirit can make folks afraid of messing up or afraid of being punished for breaking a rule and end up negating the purpose of the rules. Remember Jesus showed he was not afraid to break the law by healing on the Sabbath, because it was God's intention for people to be well, not let the rules get in the way of well-being.

So, the 10 Commandments were a part of the story, but not the fulfillment of God's promise. With the wind and fire settling on all those who followed Jesus, - and scholars tell us there may have been more than just the twelve disciples and Jesus' mother present in that house-, arriving on the day of Pentecost, the author of Luke and Acts may be telling us Jesus finally got his wish, God's promise was finally fulfilled and the day the prophet Joel predicted had come to pass. God had given us the world and everything in it. God had given us God's Son in Jesus. And now, God had given God's own Spirit. God has given us all of God, not some or part of God, but all of God. God does not hold anything back from us. No longer will God's people be living by rules without Spirit. And those who received that Holy Spirit couldn't wait to tell about it.

My favorite part of the Pentecost story is the part that isn't there. One moment we heard about a house full of people and wind and fire, next thing we know the disciples were outside that house talking to their neighbors in ways their neighbors could understand. Somehow the gift of the Holy Spirit was so wonderful, so exciting, so empowering, they just couldn't stay inside any more. They had to get out from behind those walls and go out and share what they had experienced and as they did, they found people understood them. I believe it is worth noting God's Spirit did not light on the house or building, but on the people. All the people. No one was left out.

We often say this is the birth or creation of the Church; yet it is easy to forget what the Church is. And that is one reason we are all invited to wear red today; to remind us that the Church isn't the walls and windows and pulpit and organ and altar; those things help us worship God together, but they are not the church. Nor is the Church the kitchen or Nehls Hall, or the chapel or Hobson room, or the offices or the

former rectory. Those are tools and resources for us to do the work God has given us to do and build community, and they may be important in their own way, but they are not the Church. The Church isn't where the wind rushed, it is who felt that violent wind on their face, its whose hair got messed up, it was the ones who suddenly found themselves burning bright with life-giving joy that is the mark of God's love. The Church is you and me. The Church is our fellow followers of Jesus in other parishes around the world. The Church is bishops and deacons and staff persons who work in offices in dioceses and church organizations around the world, the Church is anyone who has felt that wild wind, and who has felt the life-giving fire of joy in their hearts.

In a way, Jesus wish wasn't fulfilled in the giving of the Holy Spirit. It was fulfilled when those who received the Holy Spirit let it burn in their hearts and who went out and shared the wonders of God with all people. Jesus' wish coming true wasn't the end of an old story as much as it was a beginning, where his mission to show people God's love in forgiveness, redemption and life-giving transformation is passed on and carried out by those who follow him today. It doesn't have to look all wild and unruly like in the book of Acts. Sometimes it looks like a life-giving conversation, like the several conversations I was honored to hear during the Lenten Left-over series on Emergence Christianity that finished on Wednesday, or in Vestry meetings, or in conversations I've been honored to have with students at Wednesday Lunch, or at other times during the year. Maybe you can remember being in a conversation that made you feel really alive or energized. Many times, the Presence of the Holy Spirit can be felt during a worship service, in music or the words of a prayer or in one of the readings, or maybe the sermon. And in Holy Communion, where the Spirit transforms the ordinary into the sacramental. I still remember warmly and dearly the first Sunday I was with you as a supply priest, and how my family and I felt the Holy Spirit right here, and I believe even more passionately today that it is through that Holy Spirit that we came together as parish and priest, and is still with us working with us and through us.

And whenever we carry that life-giving love of God with us into the world, we are doing so much more than being good followers of Jesus, or doing good works, we are participating in the fulfillment of God's promise to bring God's Love to all people, and we are making Jesus' own wish come true. Which means we don't just proclaim alleluia, we live alleluia.