

# **RISKING THE FIRE**

Sermon given by Dan Phillips

At Caroline Valley Community Church

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<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup>And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. <sup>5</sup>Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. <sup>7</sup>And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, <sup>11</sup>both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." <sup>12</sup>And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup>But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

We have reached the season of Pentecost in the church year. And for our theme this year, we are adopting the image of fire. Fire is mentioned in the story of Pentecost, and is the most enduring image of this event. As we go through this portion of the church calendar, we will explore the meaning of fire as metaphor and image, and how it relates to our Christian lives.

First, fire is a symbol of passion. It means something that is powerful and alive. Like other forms of life, fire can grow, can reproduce itself, and can move from place to place. It's not really alive, but we can see the similarity between fire and life. And that similarity has led many cultures to see fire as the energy that propels life and that mirrors human passions. We say that somewhat who is passionate is 'fiery'. We talk of people being 'on fire' for God, or for some other reason. We speak of people who are in love as 'smoldering' with passion. And we will

examine what passion means in our existence as both humans and believers.

Fire is also associated with light. Light lets us see things in a different, better way. And passions alter our perception just as light alters our eyesight. Where there is fire, things are looked at differently. We will examine the differences in our spiritual outlook that occur when we become passionate for God and God's ways.

Fire changes things. Fire destroys the old and makes way for the new. Fire eats up the material things that we prize so much, and changes our world, whether we like it or not.

Fire is power. Burning various substances in a controlled way has let us humans do things we could not otherwise do. We burn gasoline to go from place to place. We burn fuel oil, or natural gas, or coal, or wood, to heat our houses. We have harnessed fire to build the civilization we enjoy today.

And fire is ambiguous. Fire can be both good and bad, sometimes at the same time. Fire can produce, and fire can destroy. Fire can light the way, and eat up the forests we need. Fire can take us to new places, and can let us destroy the new places we are taken to. Passions, too, are ambiguous. A love for God can make us bold, and can make us reckless, uncaring.

Passion for the success of God's work can create both a Mother Theresa and a David Koresh.

So: fire is passion, is powerful, changes things, creates and destroys, and is ambiguous. All these things we will explore in some detail in our next two months of worship.

In our text today, we are introduced to the Holy Spirit. Now the image of fire is only one of the images we see in Acts 2 for the Divine Spirit. The other image is wind, and I have to say something about that image. In John chapter 3, Jesus is recorded saying that the Spirit is like the wind, it goes where it wants to, and no one can see it, or restrain it. In Acts 2 we are told of the sound of a mighty rushing wind. Was it just the sound, or was there a wind? We are not told. But the passage makes it clear that the Spirit is present.

The image of fire is recorded as being 'divided tongues of fire' that came to each person there. Each person got the fire: men and women alike. In this important way the coming of the Holy Spirit is egalitarian. It comes to everyone alike, and results in everyone being enabled by the Spirit. Speaking about the gifts of the Spirit, Paul in his writings makes it clear that each believer has a gift.

Just as each of us has the Spirit, and a gift, each of us has passion. Each of us wants something, likes something, or

someone. Each of us dislikes something, or someone. We all have emotions and desires. A part of our discussion of fire will be to examine how we deal with our passions, our likes and dislikes.

The egalitarian tongues of fire came to a room full of worshipping people. They were together praying and waiting on God. Over the next few weeks, we will examine when passion strikes us, and why. When do we suddenly get the urge to visit a sick neighbor, invite a friend to worship, or help the poor? And what does this tell us about our passion for God?

The fire drove the first Christians out into the street, and caused them to speak in strange languages. Passion is what motivates us today. We do those things that are emotionally important to us. That's what emotions, or passions, are about. We all know that cars can be driven fast or slow. Most of us know how to make our cars go fast, faster than the law allows. We know the penalty for going too fast! But for some of us, there is a passion for going really fast. We enjoy driving 90 miles an hour, even though it is dangerous, even though it could get us into trouble. Passion motivates!

What motivates us? What drives us spiritually? What makes us speak in a strange language, and speak to people we don't know, people from a different country? Do we know what

drives us? Have we spent so much of our lives denying our passions, our wants, that we no longer know what they are? Denial is a place where many of us live. When it comes to examining the fire in our lives, honesty is important.

Passion motivates! The fire inside us will cause us to act, to learn, to grow. It is so important for Christians to understand that. We cannot be emotionless Christians and accomplish what God wants from us. We need to recognize the fire within us, the Spirit that lives in us, and we need to respond to its urging. We need to harness the internal spiritual fire and let it work through us to build the kingdom of God.

Spiritual fire will lead us to interact with a broader world. The first Christians went out into the streets of their city. We too will be driven out of our comfort zone. And our interactions will not always be pleasant. The first Christians were thought to be drunk, to be outside the social norms, to be an oddity. We need to understand that our passion for God will cause us to be seen in a negative light by those who are not Christian, or who have not responded to God's call. They will say we are drunk, or on drugs, or crazy, or fanatics. Our passion will not make us popular with the culture we live in.

And, the fire is ambiguous. Not only does the popular culture react badly to our passion, but we ourselves will often

misuse the fire. Within 15 years of the time of Pentecost, Paul has to write to the church at Corinth about misuse of the Spirit. Those in Corinth who could do what the Pentecost Christians did (speak in tongues when filled with the Spirit) had begun to feel that they were better Christians than those who did not speak in tongues. Paul devotes much of his first letter to the Corinthians in telling them why this is wrong, and how they should address the gifts of the Spirit. We will speak in coming weeks about how to insure we don't misuse the divine power we are given. And we will speak about how to know when God is moving us through the Spirit, and when it is our own desire motivating us.

Well, we have enough to talk about during this Pentecost season. May God bless our earnest conversations about our passions for God and for all else.