

Where there's smoke, there's fire.

Something big is going on at our church. Church staff and Session leaders and skilled laborers are collaborating at all hours with great care. Committee meetings have, of course, been conducted. All to undergo a project to install a French Drain downstairs.

Now, I can't tell you what a French Drain is, necessarily. I'm pretty confident that I know what a drain is, but I can't tell you what makes this one French. (Maybe it's like French Fries, thought, where they're not really French). But what I do know by what I'm told is that it will help save us from a lingering threat of water damage.

Because water and old church buildings don't mix. Maybe that's because the buildings are old. Maybe that's why we have that font up here for our baptisms and not a dunk tank. That's a thing you might see in newer churches, churches that aren't so temperamental about their wood floors. After all, water can be dangerous. Now, it's not the kind of danger for which we'd station a lifeguard by the baptismal font.

But fire. Fire is dangerous. So fire and churches **definitely** don't mix. Also, because church buildings are so old. Water is a pretty ordinary thing (our bodies are 70% water after all!), but fire, well, we **do** have a volunteer fire department station right next to our building. Fire is terrifying and dangerous. It rips and crackles and incinerates. When something's on fire, it's an extraordinary occasion.

There's a seminary, a school for pastors, from another church tradition not too far from here. They're from a higher church tradition, with vestments and set prayers

and priests. But for the longest time, this seminary prided themselves on being on the lower end of that high church tradition, they weren't so temperamental about their liturgy and worship, at least by comparison.

But in the interest of being welcoming and open to change, they opened up their worship to new practices. And, as it told to me, it wasn't long after, that they found their century old chapel lit ablaze in the wee hours of the morning, all because some smoking incense used in worship the night before wasn't properly extinguished.

After all, where there's smoke, there's fire.

Something about fire goes down right to the bones, even if it isn't like water, 70% of our body. Fire cuts right to our sense of identity, who we are and what we're about and what we've always done. It's a moment...of energy...that changes what we know about ourselves and how we relate to each other.

Fire's always been tied to progress. Think of those early cave men (and women) discovering fire, or the industrialists harnessing fire for the steam engine. But the progress of fire is less about continuity than disruption. Fire changes things, and we can't always quite understand who we are after it or even because of it.

It seems there's no better way to set a moment apart than with fire. That's why we have fireworks. And this isn't more true anywhere than in our reading from the book of Acts. This is the first Pentecost, when the fire of the Holy Spirit descends on the 11 apostles.

We should be able to find continuity, here. This is the start of the church! Of us! It should be familiar, we should be able to firmly place ourselves in relationship to this moment that's set apart. But when we dig under the rubble, that's more challenging than you'd think.

Now, there's the obvious difference: we don't really speak in tongues, you don't often see us Presbyterians quote "drowning in the Spirit," at least in comparison to other traditions. It's not generally agreed upon what that really is or what it means in the New Testament, much less for us.

But there are other ways this moment seems foreign and distant to us. This is one miraculous event among many in the Book of Acts that we don't really expect anymore in polite society. You could argue that these days we still do healings, that we still release captives from prison, or even that we cast out demons. But to say it's really the same thing you'd have to grit your teeth or cross your fingers behind your back.

This is no little cause for insecurity. We do not recognize ourselves here. And maybe we should be able to, right?

How do we know the Spirit is here with us? When I read in Paul's letters that Christ was made truly known in the gatherings of the early church, even after his death, it feels like today God is more distant than present in her church today.

Once we look past those obvious discontinuities, there are some that go even deeper, that are even more confusing.

Because with God, where there's smoke there's fire. Where there's mystery or confusion, there's something clear and powerful, if dangerous, behind it.

For one, there are the apostles. The 12 apostles minus one. i.e. those who knew Jesus for themselves, whose witness was formed by direct knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth.

They knew Jesus for one important reason. The apostles were Judean Israelites living under Roman colonization and occupation. Jewish people from the 12 tribes minus one.

So these Apostles share a peoplehood with each other, an ethnic, a national, a religious identity. And not just with each other, but with everyone else there on that first Pentecost in the holy city of Jerusalem. And they came from all over. A diverse people, but one people, uniting in one place from dispersion. They experience a deep intimacy. As one theologian says, “The Book of Acts is the revolution of the intimate.” God intimately tearing, rumbling, crackling through as the fire of Holy Spirit, not just distant, but intimately burning within his chosen people.

Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.

We, or at least most of us, have not entered the picture yet. Because most of us are Gentiles, people not born of Israel. The apostle Paul hasn’t entered the picture yet. Gentiles have not yet been grafted onto that living tree. So this is an intimacy of peoplehood that is not yet ours, even in the newly formed church.

And perhaps this still feels true to you.

Many of us are the descendants of immigrants and settler colonizers. Sure, we can pay 100 bucks to get a 23 and Me. But we struggle to find any solid claim to any peoplehood, much less pride in a common peoplehood. We come from all over, but unlike those gathered in Jerusalem we don’t all share many of the same experiences, we can’t count on shared understandings of who we are, even in the church.

These days it's common to feel starved for intimacy. We don't want a miracle or signs of power or fire as much as we want friendship, companionship, to be valued in community, to feel part of something bigger than ourselves.

And yet, alienation, loneliness, mental health crises are at an all time high. Our communities are wracked by division. We can't seem to agree on anything of importance. The center cannot hold, and the haze of smoke only seems to obscure our true selves from each other and even ourselves.

But where there's smoke, there's also fire. Dangerous fire.

Because the intimacy we do have available to us can often be very dangerous.

The fire of progress in this day is the energy of technology. There's social media that exposes us to each other in new and dangerous ways, forming our habits and our attention, creating anxieties about how we see ourselves and show ourselves and value ourselves in relationship to others.

Then there's the fire exploding in the chamber of a gun. It grips the global world and even closer to home schools and churches and homes, reaching out in evil ways that are disgustingly intimate.

This fire of intimacy seems too terrible, too risky. And this is the intimacy of Babel. God saw a dangerous intimacy in the people of Babel, building a tower to make a public name for themselves—united in a common peoplehood with a common language.

But Babel tells us that the intimacy we so desperately long for isn't good on its own. Without God, we'll use even intimacy for disorder and great evil.

And so God disperses those people and confuses their languages. Because where there's smoke, there's also fire to blow it away.

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle's words of power with tongues of fire in many different languages weren't just nonsense. We don't have their words written down, but it's important to remember that they were understood. The people who were there understood them. In fact, that's the problem. Because their clear words declaring the mighty works of God confronted those people with a new form of intimacy. So some, some asked "What does this mean?" And others declared them drunk with new wine.

So Peter climbs up to make it very, very clear to them and to us. He quotes the prophets of old and he tells them about what Jesus had accomplished in the present.

Where there's smoke, there's also holy fire.

Because God in the Holy Spirit is breath, a rush of violent wind dispersing the smoke, speaking to us and making our vision clear.

Even though us Gentiles aren't yet here on this scene of Pentecost, even the dispersed smoke will tell us where we should find ourselves, and how we should see ourselves. God will even take up our lack of intimacy with this moment and these people.

Because even though **we** aren't there and don't know what the disciples said to the people with tongues of fire, Peter climbs up and his words are immortalized to make it clear to us.

He doesn't just tell those gathered Israelites about their past glory as a people or the present confusion of Jesus's resurrection. He lays out a future for them, a new intimacy. And that's where we can find ourselves.

So the grace we receive as Gentiles in this vision is not that we have a claim to the past, but that we are claimed by God's future. We don't share an intimate personhood with Peter or the disciples. We don't even share an unbroken line of

apostleship. We don't speak in the same language or languages they did. Christ's spirit is not ours in that way.

The Jesus of the past is not ours. But Peter's words tell us that **we** are **Christ's** in the final consummation. God won't be ours, because Christ was revealed to another people in the past. But we will be his. And God in the Spirit won't be ours either in miracles and tongues of fire, but we are told that God in the Spirit is **on the loose**. *Where there's fire, there's smoke breathed out and dispersed.*

After the fire was put out at that seminary chapel, almost everything was ruined. The historic stained glass and a building that insurance couldn't properly replace. Everything was burned to a crisp, everything except the lectern and its Bible, and the baptismal font. Those were only darkened by the smoke.

So we need these Jewish apostles who knew Jesus, and the prophets who told them who to look for, to waft the smoke away to tell us what to look for in the flames. To use the fire to illumine for us who God is, and who we are, and what we are to be. That's what Scripture is.

We even need preaching and teaching from pulpits like this to be reminded that the Spirit's still here with us. Speaking to us. Calling us.

But we also need the water of baptism.

Peter finishes his speech to them later in the chapter by saying "Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away—as many as the Lord our God invites."

As many as the Lord our God invites.

That's our place in this story. That's the new intimacy we can live into.

Faced with the possibility of that new intimacy, we're forced to ask: What intimacy are we living into right now that is built on something less than? What intimacy of ours is old and dangerous and death-dealing?

Maybe our intimacy is lodged in a dream of common peoplehood from the past that is divisive and not diverse. Maybe it makes us separate ourselves from our own pasts of trauma and abuse. Maybe it ties our sense of safety to our zip codes and housing values and school districts. Maybe it takes our breath away because our sense of self worth comes from our own accomplishments, rather than God's great love for us.

But where there's smoke, there's also fire. And that fire is here in our midst, is within us down to the bone. After all, as the old Southern saying goes, smoke follows beauty.

So we can live for a new intimacy. We can find the ground for our identity in something much deeper than our national identity or our political party or our income or our zip code our achievements or even our families. We're not promised this won't be dangerous.

After all, fire and churches don't mix. So we need to go out from this place. We need to find that fire of new intimacy out there. And to keep us safe, we've been claimed with baptismal water, doused with it. Because where there's smoke, there's fire.

