

What Is That?

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On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were about to receive... - John 7: 37-39a

A couple of weeks ago we were having dinner at the home of some friends who have a two year old daughter. We’d met the daughter once before, but it was months ago, and that’s a long time when you’re two. About halfway through dinner she looked over at me. I waved, smiled. She looked. Without moving her eyes off me, she leaned toward her mom and asked in a loud whisper, “What is that?”

I thought of that a few days ago. Charlene and I were next door at our home, working in the kitchen. Suddenly we heard a strange clanging noise that sounded like it came from over here someplace. I ran here to the church, went downstairs to a basement full of people. An alarm was ringing. Half the people were ignoring it. The other half came up to me and asked me, “What is that?”

They were asking the wrong guy. I had no idea. But eventually, together we discovered the cause of the clamor: The plumbers were testing the fire-suppression system.

On that day of Pentecost, it is a strange, noisy day in Jerusalem. Peter and all the followers of Jesus women and men, are together, sitting around together, talking together. Luke tells us that there are about 120 followers of the Way—it’s too soon to call them Christians. They are together, and they are doing, not much. But at least they’re together! And together was good enough for them.

But together is not good enough for God. Isn’t that the trouble, sometimes, with the church? We think that just being together is the point. And it’s not.

Suddenly, there in Jerusalem, they hear a sound, a sound they can’t identify, a noise that sounds like a violent windstorm, and the sound fills the whole house.

And before they can say, “what is that?” something like flames of fire fill the place, and there is a tongue of fire over each person. And that’s important. If Pentecost is something that happens to this first community of believers, it is also something that happens to each of them as individual people.

Here’s one thing that I’ve learned in my years here at SPSA. If I want to let a lot of people know what’s going on, it’s a great idea to send an email out to the 120 or so

people on our church listserve. And if it's something that requires a response, I can virtually guarantee a response rate of something like 0%. Yes, everyone knows about it, and yes, everyone figures somebody else is going to respond.

God knows that. The spirit sends this fiery message through celestial cyberspace, but also to 120 individual people, demanding a response. And God gets a response!

Before the people can look around and say, "what is that?" they find themselves filled with the spirit. They begin talking—but instead of asking, they're testifying! Instead of wondering, they're witnessing!

Each of them begins to speak about the things God does, and all of them are speaking in ways they don't understand, but speaking languages other people do understand! What a holy cacophony it must have been.

Jerusalem is full of people from all over who have gathered there, just like the apostles, to celebrate the Jewish festival of *Shavuot*, the celebration of the giving of God's word to the people of Israel.

And Jerusalem is full of devout Jews from every corner of the known world, people who were drawn there by the desire to live in the heart of the action, people who were drawn there to live in the midst of a wonderful, vibrant stew of ethnicities and cultures.

There are people from dozens of countries, speaking dozens of languages, and somehow, in some way I won't attempt to understand or explain, they each understand the witness of these 120 fiery followers of Jesus.

And Luke says the crowd, the whole crowd has one question, only one question, and here it is: "What. Is. That?"

What is that? Say it with me, 'What is that?' Say it again, 'What is that?'

The apostles are on fire! They are filled with the Spirit!

But of course, there in Jerusalem, there's a fire suppression system, and it kicks in right away, limiting, defining, expressing and suppressing.

Luke says, "Some people sneered and said, 'don't worry about it, they're all drunk. It's not the spirit they're full of—they are filled with new wine!'"

It's clear in our culture today that some people are getting the wrong idea about what Christianity is about. And you know whose fault that is? Ours. Yours and mine.

Some of us were listening to the Rev. A.R. Bernard preach the other evening. He said, “If you don’t take the trouble to define yourself, you’re letting yourself be defined by other people. And they’ll be happy to do that for you.”

His words of caution are worth thinking about in the context of Pentecost. If Peter had kept his seat that day, if he hadn’t stood up there with the other 11 apostles, if he hadn’t raised his voice, the history of Pentecost would be something like this.

“The followers of Jesus, that obscure first-century prophet, were so troubled and traumatized by the loss of their leader, they all got drunk during the holidays and the movement he started for love, reconciliation, justice, peace and spiritual renewal died on the vine.

That’s not what happened.

Peter didn’t let that happen. The Spirit of God didn’t let that happen. Those 120 people, on fire with the Spirit, didn’t let that happen. And those 120 people, led by the spirit, started changing the world.

They had the confidence of God inside them. They didn’t have to let the definitions and explanations of other people douse the flames of the Spirit.

The fire-suppression system went off, sure, absolutely. The fire-suppression system went off, but it failed to quench the flames.

So here we still are, 2000 years later. All together in one place. Far from Jerusalem. Here on what Spalding Grey once called “that Island off the coast of America.” An island teeming with a delightful stew of God’s beautiful people. It’s a place both similar to and different from the Jerusalem of the First Century. And it’s a place desperately in need of the fire of the Spirit of God.

Here’s what I think. If Pentecost just happened to a bunch of Jesus followers, dismissed as drunk by the cynical fire-suppression system of the day, then we don’t have to give it another thought.

But that’s not what Luke thinks.

To Luke, what happens at Pentecost is just the overture to something that gets played out again and again, as faithful followers of the Way of love, reconciliation, justice, peace and spiritual renewal gather to bathe in the fire of the spirit.

And Pentecost still happens today. Now.

Back in the first chapter of the Gospel According to Luke, John the Baptist says to the people, sure, I can baptize you with water; anyone can do that. But somebody's coming after me who can baptize you with Spirit! Somebody's coming who can baptize you with fire!

Chances are you and I have been baptized with water. Whether or not we remember, our bodies retain the tangible memory of that cool, refreshing water, flowing down like the grace of God.

Now, it's time for another baptism. A baptism of fire.
A baptism of fire that will stir us from complacency to compassion.

A baptism of fire to move us from hearing the word of God to doing the word.

A baptism of fire that will set us on fire with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A baptism of fire that will tire of letting other people decide who Jesus is, what Christianity is, what a Christian is like, what the church is all about.

A baptism of fire

A baptism of fire that will spread around the neighborhood and this city.

That will spread around the United Methodist Church until someone sits up and says, say it with me, What is that?

A baptism of the irresistible spirit of God, that is the only thing that will ever turn this world around.

Please pray with me.

Spirit of God, we come from the waters of baptism, those waters that wash away our shame and inadequacy, that show us up the way you see us, as beautiful, beloved children of God.

Spirit of God, we come from your fire, that wonder-working, power of warmth and light and love, that fire that lights over our heads and under our tails and urges us with a fiery urgency to be about the business of your way of love, reconciliation, justice, peace and renewal, that fire that no system on earth can wholly suppress.

Spirit of God, we come from your spirit, that fills us, even when we're so full of ourselves.

Let this church and every person in it be so on fire for your gospel that every one who sees us and everyone who hears about us and everyone in this city and everybody in the denomination can't but ask,

What Is That??

Please stand and sing with me,
*We come from the water, cool, refreshing water,
Come back to the water, turn the world around.*

*We come from the fire, all of us, the fire,
Come back to the fire, turn the world around.*

*We come from the Spirit, all of us, the Spirit,
Only can the Spirit turn the world around!*