

Anne Andert
 Covenant Lutheran Church, Stoughton / 1525 N. Van Buren St. / for Wendy Moen / 9:30 AM
 June 8, 2025 / Pentecost C
 Romans 8:14-17 / Acts 2:1-21 / John 14:8-17 [25-27]
 Hymn: *O Day Full of Grace v. 1,4,5- ELW #627*
 Children's Sermon: balloon filled with the 'breath of God' to do what it was created for~

Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian church. Almost 2,000 years old. The third biggest celebration in the church year after Easter and Christmas. What are some of the things we use to celebrate birthdays? Today I brought a balloon. Red for Pentecost.

A balloon without breath is a lifeless balloon. It continues to lie wherever you put it. It doesn't move. It has no power.

Take a "lifeless" balloon and do what Jesus did -- blow into it. The Greek word for Spirit and breath are the same. So what happens when you blow into the balloon? It's full of air, but it is still lifeless, going nowhere until that power is released. [squeal the balloon] Sometimes it complains. And sometimes it flies! [release]

Under the [spirit's / breath's / wind's] power, the balloon can move. When the wind power within the balloon is released, we don't know where the balloon is going; but we know it's going somewhere.

Jesus did not give the disciples the Spirit's power so that they could stay behind locked doors in fear. It is given as a power to move people out into the world -- even if we don't always know exactly where we will go.

What happens to the balloon after it has "spent" its power? It seems lifeless again. It is out of power. It's flat. There's no more "spirit / breath" within it.

On one hand we are *not* like that balloon. Jesus promises that the Spirit will be with us forever. We will never run out of the Spirit's power. The Spirit given to you in the waters of baptism is forever.

On the other hand, over and over again in Acts, we read that certain disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. Their filling didn't just happen once, but over and over again. So we also need to be refilled. ***Weekly we return to church as a refilling station;*** to receive Jesus again in the hearing of the word, in the bread and wine, and through the fellowship of the saints. So on this birthday of the church,

Let's sing *Happy Birthday!*

Wildfire!

Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace, from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Please join me in prayer: In this holy place, and in this holy time, Lord Jesus, come to us again this morning. Open our eyes to see you, open our ears to hear the word you have for us this day, and open our hearts to receive your amazing grace and love. In your strong name we pray. Amen.

Who doesn't love to stare into the flames or embers of a campfire? Or into the gently dancing flames of a candle lit on your dinner table? There is something about flames that holds our attention and provokes reflection and conversation. There is something about flames that is fascinating and beautiful.

Today is the celebration of Pentecost. The day when we celebrate the fiery arrival of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised. Because we are familiar with the story, it is easy to imagine the coming of the Holy Spirit as the gentle flames of candlelight or a campfire. That would be a mistake.

On that first day of Pentecost there was the “sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.”

Recently there have been reports of wildfires across Canada. As of the end of May over 960 tornadoes have been reported compared to the average of about 660.¹

Rush of a violent wind.

For the disciples almost 2,000 years ago, the rush of that violent wind left in its wake tongues of fire that rested on each of the apostles. Wind and fire.

We keep seeing the evidence of the destructive power of wind and fire as several parts of the country brace for the seemingly inevitable wildfires; wondering when and where they will start and how much they will devour with an insatiable appetite. Our daughter has lived for about a decade in Colorado, and it has been true there in spades.

Wind and fire. A lethal combination really. Powerful. Frightening. Out of control.

We’ve seen reports of it. We’ve smelled it even here. I’ve seen the ash rain down like snow in Colorado. Wind and fire.

And, maybe THAT is the point of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit is on the loose in the world. The same power that comes to you in the waters of baptism. The same power that we pray is stirred up on the day of baptism and confirmation.

That promised Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Professor and Pastor David Lose suggests that our taming of the fire of the Holy Spirit does not faithfully capture the power, might and strength of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ Spirit does not come as a tame and gentle Spirit like the flames of a candle or campfire. This Spirit is unleashed on the world in wind and fire.

||: The Holy Spirit does not come on the heels of Jesus’ death and resurrection to solve our problems, but to create them. Wait. What?! Sound crazy? Listen again. :|| Consider this: without the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples could have returned to their previous careers as fishermen. But once the Spirit comes, life as before is really not an option.

The disciples are now being sent into the world to proclaim a really wild and crazy story about this preacher Jesus from Palestine; who was executed for treason and blasphemy, who has come back from the dead to redeem the world, who loves everyone and forgives and heals, and who has sent these fishermen on a mission to tell the world the news. I mean, really?!

Would you accept that assignment? A story that sounds a little less crazy would have been easier for people to understand and believe. But the Holy Spirit doesn’t solve the disciples’ problems, the Spirit creates them. Wind and fire.

¹ The Conversation (daily email) . May 23, 2025. “In 2025, Tornado Alley has become almost everything east of the Rockies - and it’s been a violent year”, by Daniel Chaves, Purdue University.

The Spirit of God, that fiery Holy Spirit, can change everything. Wild, uncontrollable Holy Spirit. Blowing through our lives. Lighting things on fire. Unsettling. Uncomfortable. Unpredictable. And so very biblical. So very rich, meaningful, fulfilling.

The Spirit can work in slow and patient ways, (one might think here of committee work or the institutional church!) but God's Spirit can also work in sudden, stunning and life-changing ways for individuals, for congregations, for communities, for whole denominations.

It can destroy what we have taken for granted for a life time. Like a prairie fire or a controlled burn eats the scrub brush from the landscape, the Spirit of God can burn away things that do not belong in God's church or in our lives. It can break open seeds that have been waiting for the fire of renewal to come. It can break open our hardened hearts and bring out the fruit of God's grace.

I trust.... I believe... that God blesses our faithfulness in trying to follow where the Holy Spirit is leading. I trust that God alone can make us less fearful, more courageous, to grow in faith as individuals and as a congregation.

Does it all sound too threatening? Too scary? I read a wonderful challenge by Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in CA (who retired 3 years ago after 40 years as founder and pastor at that congregation, and I miss his wisdom), "Don't wait to feel powerful or confident. Move ahead in your weakness, doing the right thing in spite of your fears and feelings. This is how you cooperate with the

Holy Spirit, and it is how your character develops." Or as a bumper sticker I saw once, 'God can't steer a parked car.' We move forward and allow God to direct our path.

Will you get it right every time? Not a chance. Not as individuals, and not as a congregation. The Holy Spirit does not prevent failure, but invites us to learn and grow through our mistakes.

David Lose reflected that, "As inspired as I was by the Mission Control dictum during the crisis of Apollo 13 that *failure is not an option*, I think that kind of mindset is paralyzing too many of our congregations. Failure is not only an option, it is inevitable.

The problems this world – and our congregations – face are too great, too complex, and too significant to imagine that we will land on the best solution the first time out...or maybe ever. Once we've identified a worthy challenge, we need to experiment...and count on failing, innovate...and count on failing, invent...and count on failing again.

A middle school teacher told me, "I tell my kids to make a mistake every day – just not the same mistake!" Each mistake, each set back, each false start, each failure is not to be lamented but learned from.

A pastor I knew said that every year at their annual meeting, they had an award for the biggest mistake of the year. You heard that right. They actually celebrated their congregational mistakes! For the young people being

celebrated today as they graduate, this is true for you as well!

That congregation celebrated that they were always moving beyond their comfort zone, beyond what they knew; and learning and growing. They could laugh at themselves, knowing they could count on one another's support. And in that permission-giving atmosphere, they grew in wisdom, understanding, faith, and resilience. They grew more courageous about discerning where the Spirit was calling them into new areas of ministry and outreach.

I LOVE that! Because the whole church is in a major time of change. Not just this congregation, not even just the ELCA, but the whole Christian church. Across denominations there can no longer be any denial of the fact that the church must change or die. The message of Jesus has not changed. The Good News is still good news! But HOW we are church together is changing.

We need the church to be filled and fueled with the power of the Holy Spirit. For the sake of the community. For the sake of our neighbor. For the sake of the world. For our sake, as individuals.

Look what God did through the Holy Spirit with a room full of well-intentioned bumblers... turning them into a force that changed the history of the world.

Do we still believe in a Holy Spirit that blows through closed doors into a room full of frightened, hopeless people and sets our heads on fire? Do we still believe that the Holy

Spirit has the power to transform us, both as individuals and as a congregation?

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "There is nothing you can do to make it happen as far as I know, except to pray, "Come Holy Spirit, every chance you get. Open your life to the breath of the Holy Spirit.

She continues, "If you don't want anything to change in your life, then for heaven's sake don't pray that. Look around you at the world. Your unique light is desperately needed and Jesus promises to be with you always.

How will you recognize the Spirit? There are many people who say they have never encountered God, but when they start talking about their lives, it seems pretty clear to me they have. They just did not know what to call the experience.

"Once you get the hang of it, the evidence is easier and easier to spot. Whenever you find yourself speaking with wisdom you know you do not have, or offering forgiveness you had not meant to offer - whenever you find yourself taking risks you thought you did not have the courage to take, or reaching out to someone you had intended to walk away from - you can be pretty sure that you are learning about the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

"And more than that, you are taking part in it. Breathing in and breathing out, taking the breath of God into you and giving it back to the world again with some of you attached."

Take a breath. And just keep breathing. We can call it air or we can call it Holy Spirit.

Pentecost. Wind and fire. So for the graduates today, listen to a quote from St. Catherine of Siena who said,

“Be who God meant you to be,
and you will set the world on fire.”

I pray that this congregation will help these young people to discern the gifts of the Holy Spirit they have been given, so they can set the world on fire with their God-given passion.

And for each of you, good people of Covenant, “Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire.”

I have included in your bulletin this morning, a prayer that became one of my favorites since it was first published in 2005. It remains as relevant today as it was then. Will you pray it with me this morning?

Prayer originally written by Pastor Ted Schroeder and published in *Thrivent* magazine, summer edition, 2005. Adapted by me.

(Flame video - no sound - while we pray:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M53rgEXc1zw>)

Lord, we come into your presence seeking a gracious blessing.

But we dare to ask for an outrageous portion of your grace.

We ask that you not simply equip us,
but that you chase us out into your world.

Make us people of vision who look not in but out,
not backward but forward,
not down but up,
not at what cannot be done

but at what might be accomplished by your Holy Spirit.

Make us those who seek mountains and not valleys,
narrow paths instead of wide and easy ways,
sending us new places instead of resting places,
starts instead of finishes,
horizons instead of waysides,
tomorrows instead of yesterdays.

Give us running shoes instead of slippers,
alarm clocks instead of snooze buttons,
accelerators instead of brakes,
sailboats instead of sandcastles.

Make us startle even ourselves with the power that you give.

For all we do is moved by your breath,
enveloped by your Holy Spirit,
filled with the wind of your grace,
and resounding to your glory and not ours.

‘Give us wings to fly like eagles.’
Set our hearts and minds on fire to do your will
wherever we are.

We pray in the powerful name of God the Father,
God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen

+

May you always dream God-sized dreams, and may God bless
your dreams.