

FIRES

a sermon for Pentecost delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 5, 2022 based on Acts 2:1-21

There are several symbols for Pentecost that are age old. Wind, dove, and fire are the major ones. I want today to focus on fire.

It has been said that some people only have enough religion to make themselves miserable. All they recall from the Bible are the places where it says, "Thou shalt not!" In their minds, religion is about what you *aren't* supposed to do.

In a wonderfully funny British movie, *Cold Comfort Farm*, there is a hell fire and damnation preacher portrayed. He is such a piece of work. At the opening of his sermon he says the following to his congregation, a church full of quaking terrified sinners.

Have ye come to hear me tell you of the great, crimson, licking flames of hell fire? Aye! You've come, dozens of ye. Like rats to the granary ... Well, you know what it's like when you burn your hand taking a cake out of the oven, or lighting one of them godless cigarettes? And it stings with a fearful pain, aye? And you run to clap a bit of butter on it to take the pain away, aye?

Well, I'll tell ye, there'll be no butter in hell!

Well, I think it is important on Pentecost Sunday to say that the Christian faith is more about fanning the flames of creativity than it is about quenching the fires of sin.

That is definitely what the fire in the story we read this morning is about. Those tongues of fire resting on the heads of the disciples of Jesus are first and foremost the fires of the imagination. Previously the disciples had been backward looking; fretful and regretful about the way they betrayed their Lord on his last day. Now they are forward looking. Now they are inspired. They have a vision borrowed from the Old Testament prophet, Joel. Here is Joel's vision.

The day has come when God will pour out of God's Spirit on all flesh
– Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your young men shall see visions,
Your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ And on My menservants and on My maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days;
And they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ I will show wonders in heaven above
And signs in the earth beneath:
Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.

²¹ And it shall come to pass
That whoever calls on the name of the LORD
Shall be saved

The Pentecost story as was read this morning is a retelling of the story of the Tower of Babel from Genesis, you know. So much of the New Testament is a reshaping of stories from the Old. In the Genesis story of Babel's Tower, out of their ambition to be great creators like God, the people use their ingenuity to build a tower into the heavens in order to storm its ramparts,

Sensing their overweening pride, God quashes their attempt and then confuses their languages so that they can never band together and do it again.

In the New Testament version, the story is turned inside out. The disciples who are so fearful and down-in-the-mouth at Jesus's leaving earth have been hanging out indoors for weeks. Now God's spirit rouses them and they find, miraculously, that language is not an impediment anymore.

With the teaching of Jesus taking hold in the world, the task of humans will be to value what brings them together now, not what makes them separate.

In the *Gospel of Thomas* Jesus speaks of this moment when a creative world embracing fire would be kindled. He says the following,

"I have cast fire upon the earth, and see, I am watching over it until it blazes."

It is important to say that Jesus here is not talking about the fires of hell. If anything, he is talking about the fires of Purgatory.

Purgatory? Not many Protestants give it a thought but it's a central part of the ancient Catholic tradition concerning the after-life.

It went out with the coming of Protestantism. Protestants have a "show me the money" attitude to things like Purgatory. That is to say, if it can't be found explicitly in the Bible, than Protestants have said, "We don't believe in it." But let me give you the argument for it. It comes from the writings of Dante which I used to teach years ago to undergrads.

Dante's journey of discovery begins in hell – the events of his Divine Comedy detail a spiritual journey for him.

The first and most important revelation for Dante is in the outer edge of hell where the sins are the most minor – these are sins of passion, like lust and gluttony.

Deep in the heart of Dante's hell we find the worst sinners – those guilty of treachery; Judas is there who betrayed Jesus as are Brutus and Cassius who betrayed Julius Caesar. Betrayal is a sin against love itself and that is what Dante considers the worst sin of all.

On the outer edge of hell where Dante begins are those guilty of sexual sins. There Dante meets two sinners Paolo and Francesca who recount the story of their adultery with such passion that Dante swoons. That's because it is clear that it is the sin he is most vulnerable to.

But what you pick up on, hearing these sinners recount their personal stories in hell, is how enamored all the sinners are with their sins. Paolo and Francesca are still so obsessed by their lust that they are caught up in a great swirling wind that mimics the passion that caused their fall.

And what you come to see here is first that the sinners in hell are narcissists; all of them. They can't think of anything but themselves.

Secondly you see that hell is not a place of punishment at all. It is a place where God, out of God's great love, lets narcissists have their narcissism. God lets them have the choices they made in life, whatever they are. God, out of God's great love, lets them have a space in hell away from God so they can be entirely on their own, as they desire. Every one of them is entirely caught up in whatever passion on earth held them in thrall.

Dante visits personage after personage in hell and they are all still full of all the lust and anger and resentment that filled them on earth, and they go on and on describing it to a nauseating degree – that is how it feels for Dante and everyone else who listens to their whining.

They go on and on and on about how the election was stolen from them and their Twitter account was closed and it's all so unfair. Blah, blah, blah. Whine, whine, whine.

But happily that's not the end of The Divine Comedy. In volume 2 Dante gets to Purgatory and there he meets all these people who are guilty of exactly the same sins as those in hell. Exactly the same. The difference is that every one in Purgatory realizes how stupid they had been in life.

Every one of them is anxious to get rid of the angers, and resentments and passions that hamstrung them in life. Where the sinners in hell hate one another, and can't understand why everyone there isn't as obsessed with them as they are obsessed with themselves, in Purgatory there is a deep sympathy among all the sinners.

They all do whatever they can do to help each other purge themselves of the pettiness that made them stumble in life. It's really beautiful. And at the end of Purgatory, in view of the gates of Paradise every one of them goes through a little fire (remember this sermon is about fire). The fire there terrifies Dante but he is required to go through it, too, but go through it he does and in that fire the little

petty passions he felt on earth that he thought were so amazing are now subsumed in the great passionate fire of God.

His little fire of lust becomes part of the great fire of God's love and Dante realizes that there was nothing wrong with his passions on earth. They were simply meant to point him to greater passion he would, in the afterlife, find for God.

And so Purgatory is seen to be a crucial step toward heaven, a place where human beings have a chance to look backward just long enough to put their lives into perspective and rejoice that life on earth was merely an elementary school meant to get them ready for a deeper life God has ready for those who will want to embrace it in heaven.

And here is the bottom line lesson: you can't be solitary and independent if you want to be close to God. If you want to be alone with yourself and your obsessions, hell is the place for you.

It's perfect, but if you want to be with God you have to embrace community and, according to Dante, that is achieved for the great mass of humanity in the final purifying fire of Purgatory.

So, think again about Pentecost. Tongues of fire rested on all the souls there, and they began, for the first time in their lives to hear other people from other lands speaking their own language. Community became possible. All humanity became one.

That is the goal of life, you know.

The late Thich Naht Hanh said it best: "We are on this earth in order to wake up from the illusion of our own separateness."

Now, if Dante doesn't persuade you of the need for Purgatory, let me tell you another story that has all the same import. It is called, *The Parable of the Onion*, and it comes out of the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky. It is contained in his novel, *The Brothers Karamzov*. Maybe you read it once years ago.

The parable in it is told by one of the brothers, the religious one, Alyosha, and it goes like this . . .

Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire.

Well, her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell God that might get her out of hell: and he remembered one. "She once pulled up an onion in her garden," said he, "and gave it to a beggar woman."

And God answered, "You take that onion then, and hold it out to her in the lake where she is, and let her take hold of it and she can use it as a handle to be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise."

So the angel runs excitedly to the woman and holds out the very onion to her; "Come," says he, "catch hold and I'll pull you out." And he began cautiously pulling her out.

He had just pulled her completely out so that her toes were dripping with fire and water when the other sinners in the lake, seeing she was being drawn out, swam to her and one of them caught hold of her ankle so as to be pulled out with her. And as that one was pulled out another grabbed on to that one and thus was created a chain of humanity rising from the lake of fire.

But this was a very selfish woman and she began kicking the one right below her with her free foot. "I'm the one to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours."

And as she struggled and screamed and kicked, the onion broke. And the woman and the chain of others below her fell back into the lake where she is burning, still, to this day.

So the angel wept and went away thinking that had she not struggled so selfishly, all the sinners in hell might have been freed because of that one onion.

“We are on this earth for one purpose – to wake up from the illusion of our own separateness.” That is the truth at the heart of the fires of Pentecost.

That illusion that we are supposed to live fully independent lives is responsible for all the idiotic rhetoric that says we have no room for any more migrants when, in fact, our economy is sputtering for lack of hundreds of thousands more such people needed to staff our service industries. That illusion is responsible for the intransigence on gun control legislation because those against it say we need guns to protect ourselves from one another.

To these who are stuck in the past with obsolete obsessions, whining constantly the Bible presents this word of Pentecost hope ... You may be stuck in the past, but consider those in the coming generations who aren't so selfish – who aren't hung up about immigration and realize the disease of the gun lobby in this nation.

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.

Your young men shall see visions,

Even some of your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ *And on My menservants and on My maidservants*

I will pour out My Spirit in those days;

And they shall prophesy.

Amen