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Consuming Fire

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

More than fifteen years ago, the sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton released the first findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion. Smith and Denton were among the first people to study the feelings and beliefs of American teens. Unfortunately, their findings were not encouraging. They outlined several beliefs that were held in common by most teenagers and they coined a term to describe these beliefs. They called it "moralistic therapeutic deism." Most of the 3000 teens they interviewed felt that the purpose of their faith was to help them be a good person - a good enough person - so that they would have a happy life. Most of them felt that the purpose

of various spiritual disciplines was to improve their life just like good therapy or eating healthy. And they didn't believe that God was particularly necessary except when a personal crisis arises. These beliefs shouldn't surprise us, because it is kind of the same way we think about Target. It is there when you need a toothbrush or a cute throw pillow. But that is the trouble, because then we're not disciples, we're not the faithful, we're not really the Church, we're *consumers*. God comes around whenever we need God, but otherwise, there isn't much to it. Our relationship with God becomes just like everything else. We have the grocery store when we need food, the doctor when we're sick, the library for books, a completely domesticated park when we need time in the 'great outdoors.' And we have church for any and all existential crises. God is a cosmic vending machine, and general morality is the currency. Be a 'good enough' person and when something happens, God will happily dispense two aspirins for the pain. It is a consumer faith. And God is just one more commodity. But what if, instead, it is God who consumes us?

Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit in today's passage from Acts, and you can just picture it from the glossy pages of a storybook Bible. The disciples, long beards, pious looks (nevermind that the crowds wonder if they're drunk), with happy little birthday-candle flames above their heads. A jolly scene. But, maybe it ought to feel a little bit more, I don't know, *concerning*. The ancient understanding of fire is like a wildfire: engulfing farms, towns, whole cities, ending lives, ruining livelihoods, traumatizing families forever. For those whose homes are lit and kept warm exclusively by fire, but whose homes might be consumed by the smallest stray flare, fire is not cute or tame. It is like those who work among fire and flames - making glass or smelting metal or running an incinerator. Fire is feared and respected for all that it can do. One of the oldest names of God is *esh okelah*, a name we rarely hear, but one that surely jumped to the lips of the gathered disciples. *Esh okelah* - it means consuming fire. If this is what our God is like - a fire that purifies the valuable and incinerates the rubbish - a fire that consumes, burns up, terrifies - dare we approach this God for anything?

If we come too close, don't we risk being burned in the process? Abraham and Sarah had to leave home. Moses had to go back to a land where he was wanted for murder to tell Pharaoh what that tyrant didn't want to hear. Samuel's mom, Hannah, and Samson's mom, and John the Baptist's mom, Elizabeth - they are prayed fervently for a child who they then gave over to God's service. Ezekiel got a sign for Israel's future when God raised an army. And today, the disciples, fearfully huddled, desiring direction, are given the words to speak, but from here they will be scattered to the four winds, and while they will preach with eloquence, while the word of God on their lips will change lives, it will consume almost every single one of them.

Do we dare ask for help? Do we dare approach the one who sometimes called flame but can also be consuming fire? Or called advocate, like an attorney, but may also be the prosecution who convicts us? Called breath, but also can be a tornado? Dare we ask God for help? Because what if we are the answer, and it consumes us? This is exactly what

calls into question the moralistic therapeutic deism that pervades our time. We're called to give of ourselves, to follow a model of self-sacrifice, to give ourselves up to our own crosses, to love neighbors who do not love us back, to forgive others who will hold a grudge against us, to preference and devote ourselves to those society has pushed aside.

We believe not in a personal divine vending machine who turns good deeds into minor miracles, but in a Consuming Fire, a Holy Spirit. When we say this is the God in whom we believe, Luther says that this God, this Holy Spirit "has called [us] through the gospel, enlightened [us] with his gifts, made [us] holy, and kept us in the truth faith, just as he calls, gathering, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth." We're not called to niceness, we're not called to be consumers, our ultimately goal is likely not a good and happy life for ourselves. No, we are prophets, priests, and visionaries. Today we will see wine and bread become grace. We have seen water become a flood that washes over one new baptized person after another, drowning their sinful self and every single day rising them to new life. God is not a divine vending machine. But if we bring to God the troubles of our day - the losses of the pandemic, our fear over wars and rumors of wars, the lives of those who flee bloodshed, the hope of those who seek life in a new place, the wrecked bodies of those whose days and nights are spent in search of a safe place to lay their heads - if we seek help from God, from Consuming Fire, we may be consumed, too.

When Luther offers to us an explanation of who this third person of the Trinity is, this Spirit, he ends with this truth, "On the last day, the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true." Beloved, if we find ourselves judged, the Spirit is our Advocate. If we find ourselves unable to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words to express. If we find ourselves dreamless, adrift, God will pour out the Spirit on us, breathing life into us as on the first day of creation, when a wind from God swept over the face of the deep and what God made God called Good. If we find our bones dry, our flesh withered, God will piece us back together and invigorate us. If we are dead, God will open our graves. If we are ash, burnt up, burnt out, returned to dust, then the Spirit will hold us in peace forever.

Come, Holy Spirit,
And let the church say...
Amen.