

True Life

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

Pentecost
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“I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live. . . .” – Ezekiel 37:14a

We begin our celebration of Pentecost and our exploration of Ezekiel 37:14a with a quotation from that quintessentially English poet and devout Anglican who was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and educated at Harvard, T. S. Eliot, who wrote, among other things,

We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

The poem is “Little Gidding,” one of the four that made up the *Four Quartets* Eliot wrote during the bombing of Britain in the second world war. I had to look up the word “suspire” – it means to breathe – and my word processing program always underlines it in squiggly red to alert me that the brain inside my laptop doesn't recognize the word, either. A word that neither I nor my scribal doppelganger recognizes always gets my attention, since we both live by words. Eliot, on the other hand, surrounded by the fire raining down on London from the Luftwaffe, says that we live only when we are consumed by fire. Let us, for a moment, take Eliot at his word.

Today is Pentecost, the day of fire in the Christian church. A pastor and preacher more hip than I might declare that we are lit, or that we are on fire for the Lord, as Helen, one of our regulars at the Brookdale service, always is. We might, as Emmaus Bible Fellowship urges and promises, “feel the burn.” Failing that – as most formerly mainline churches will – we might bend the plea framed by Robby Krieger for the Doors that the Holy Spirit might “light our fire.”

And perhaps it already has. Perhaps the lighting that the Holy Spirit ignited in this place in 1956 and again in 1957 endures, burning less aggressively than it once did, but just as brightly.

And so I continue to remind the head usher, from time to time, to make sure that the altar candles, including the little church on the credence shelf, are lit before the Sunday service, for they are the outward and visible sign of that inward and invisible grace that we commonly call the Holy Spirit, the author and giver of life, and the “I” who speaks in our text from Ezekiel for this morning.

“I will put my spirit within you and you shall live,” says the Lord to the Israelites through the prophet Ezekiel. The I, of course, is God, the Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah, the Christ, the eternal, uncreated Word, the Holy Ghost – all one and the same, three-in-one, a divine trinity, one God in three Persons, distinct yet undivided, whom we will celebrate next week, which is Trinity Sunday.

This morning we celebrate the so-called third person of that trinity, the Holy Spirit, often depicted as a dove, more commonly presented in Scripture as a flame.

“Now Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, a Midianite priest . . . and came to Horeb, the mountain of God, where Yahweh's messenger appeared to him in a flaming fire in a bush that, though burning, was not consumed” (Exodus 3:1-2). There it begins, that identification of the still-

speaking Holy Spirit with flame, and here, at the front of our sanctuary, we maintain it and contain it in the decorous flames of candles.

But they are one and the same. The God who spoke to Moses through a messenger who spoke to Moses through a flaming bush who spoke to the prophet Ezekiel with the promise of new life who spoke to that international gathering in Jerusalem fifty days after Easter speaks to us through the flames of our candles every Sunday morning. That's why we light them. We light them to remind ourselves of that holy fire that both lights our way, consumes our dross like a refiner's fire, and demands our attention and our care.

No one with any sense lights a candle and walks away. An untended flame is a dangerous flame, but for those paying attention and who care, a tended flame on an altar dedicated to the Still-Speaking One can be even more dangerous. It may capture our imagination, as we stare at it, drifting in and out of attention to the droning one, and it may give us a gentle light to show us the way forward.

And in one of those paradoxes in which the sacred takes such great delight, that holy flame depends on the breath or wind or spirit, which is likewise holy, to provide it with the oxygen it needs to live but not so much as to extinguish it. The breath or wind or spirit gives life and yet takes it, also. There is the delicate dance of creation, to which we are invited, played out for us, on our altar, Sunday after Sunday. Do you not perceive it?, Isaiah asked.

We the church must ask ourselves, on Pentecost of all days, Do we not perceive the flame of the spirit, on our altar, in our hearts, in the streets, in the headlines, in the protests, in the movements, in the hashtags? Are they not the evidence of the divided tongues of Pentecost that allow each to hear the spirit's speaking? Bread for the World, Cleveland Pride, Open and Affirming, Loaves and Fishes, the Culinary Club, More Light Presbyterians, *The Book of Joy* – upon these we see the tongues of the spirit that gladden our hearts. Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, Pat Robertson, the Westboro Baptist Church – on these, not so much. Is that because the spirit rests elsewhere or because our ability to perceive the spirit's flame has grown parochial? Do those who perceive the spirit differently help us to see the spirit better?

When the spirit gives life, God's ways are not our ways Isaiah warned us. We are a tongue of the spirit's flame, nothing more and nothing less. We live as the spirit gives us life. And if we truly live, we are consumed by that spirit's fire. If Christ be raised from the dead, Jaroslav Pelikan has said, nothing else matters. And if Christ be not raised from the dead, Pelikan continues, nothing else matters. That is what it means to be consumed by the spirit.

We have armed ourselves with the firepower to destroy ourselves many times over, and we are not saved. We live in the constant fear of the works of our hands plus one wrong judgment, one bad decision, one mistaken belief, one false alarm.

Against this is the spirit's divided Pentecostal fire, preserved in its divinely ordered division in two flames on our altar, week after week, proclaiming that Christ has been raised from death, to the glory of God and for our salvation. Will we allow ourselves to be consumed by that fire from heaven, or will we continue to build up our weapons of mass destruction while our schools and roads and bridges and churches crumble to dust?

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