

“We Didn’t Start the Fire”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from John 17:20-26

Hear the words from the Jesus’ beloved disciple, John:

Read John 17:20-26

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Living God,

you have created all that is.

Send forth your Spirit to renew and restore us,

that we may proclaim your good news

in ways and words

that all will understand and believe. Amen.

Intro:

Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnnie Ray

South Pacific, Walter Winchell, Joe DiMaggio

Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, Television

North Korea, South Korea, Marilyn Monroe

Rosenbergs, H-Bomb, Sugar Ray, Panmunjom

Brando, The King And I, and The Catcher In The Rye,

Eisenhower, Vaccine, England's got a new queen

Marciano, Liberace, Santayana goodbye

We didn't start the fire

It was always burning since the world's been turning

This monster hit of a song by Billy Joel was created in 1989, when Joel turned 40. The idea spawned from a conversation he had with a friend of Sean Lennon. The friend just turned 21 and was complaining about how crazy it was to be living in his era, therefore undermining any

“We Didn’t Start the Fire”

other time before his. This encouraged Joel to write a song that would prove that any time is filled with extremes. Starting from 1949 (the year in which he was born), he chronicled the major events that occurred during that time in a rapid fire delivery of names, places, and cultural works. “We Didn’t Start the Fire” is a constant reminder that no matter how crazy times may seem today, they have always been crazy and will continue to be crazy as long as life continues to exist.¹

I wanted to bring up this familiar song to you this morning not to discourage you all that life is crazy (we all know that), but in fact to remind you that through the chaos God kept His promise to us and brought a new fire. (A new fire, not familiar to us until now, but nevertheless has always been burning since the world’s been turning.) And this new fire that Luke in his book of Acts tells us about came to us today, almost 2,020 years ago. Today, the day of first converts, the first community of believers, the First Church that was clothed with power from on high.

I hinted at why Pentecost and why we celebrate it. But what is Pentecost? Today is the Church’s birthday. So Happy Birthday! Happy origin story. Happy beginnings. This is what we celebrate at Pentecost — the launching of the Church into the world. The day where God humbled Himself (yet again) to us and gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Helper, the Guide that walks alongside us through the chaos and gives us Order and Truth to the Way. And as the Holy Spirit walks alongside us it gives us the power to continue Jesus’s ministry and mission to the world. But I’m getting ahead of myself...

From the Greek pentekostos, meaning "fiftieth," Pentecost was already a Jewish festival, a pilgrimage feast where thousands gathered celebrating the spring harvest, and the revelation of the law at Mount Sinai occurring 50 days following Passover. In the Pentecost story Luke tells in

¹ <https://genius.com/Billy-joel-we-didnt-start-the-fire-lyrics>

“We Didn’t Start the Fire”

this week’s lectionary, the Holy Spirit descended on 120 believers in Jerusalem. The Spirit empowered them to testify to God's great deeds, encouraged the apostle Peter to preach to a bewildered crowd of Jewish skeptics, and drew three thousand converts in one day.

It’s a birthday story like no other, and it’s certainly a crazy time to be alive, full of wild details that challenge the imagination. Tongues of fire. Rushing winds. Accusations of drunkenness. To put it bluntly: God showed up fifty days after Jesus’s resurrection and threw the world an unforgettable party. A party where the sense of unity and harmony among men and women, family and friends, apostles and other believers was now realized. Unity, the kind Jesus was praying for on behalf of us in the High Priestly Prayer we discussed last week was now made real in chapter 2 verse 1: “when the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place.”

But he did more than that; he gave his followers a clear and startling picture of what Christ’s body on earth should look like. "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit," Luke writes, “and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." "At this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each."

It is often thought that Pentecost is the reversal of Babel, the Old Testament story in which God divided and scattered human communities by multiplying their languages. But in fact, Pentecost didn't reverse Babel; Pentecost perfected and blessed it. Where in the OT sin destroyed communication; in the NT the Holy Spirit restored communication. When the Holy Spirit came, he didn't restore humanity to a common language; he declared all languages holy and equally worthy of God's stories. He united diversity and inclusiveness into the very fabric of

“We Didn’t Start the Fire”

the Church. He called the people of God to be at all once Together. But the church has not always been so inclusive.

In the past the church has been the religious gatekeeper of who’s in and who’s out, but what Pentecost reveals is that that which is different or foreign may actually be the gift we need. Pentecost has many meanings, but at the core of its meanings is the idea of gift.

Pentecost suggests that the ground of our spiritual life is fundamentally a divine gift. The coming of the Spirit is a gift, and all we can do, like the disciples, in (Acts 1:4) is wait for it, wait for the promise to be fulfilled. A gift is not something of our own creation; it just comes. **We didn’t start the fire**, it was always there burning, God just sets it loose on us.

“But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine’” (2:13). People don’t always understand the move of God or what is being said or played. And people don’t like what they don’t know, because it means they don’t understand it. Take for example the blues. The blues wasn’t accepted in every church because it was different, but it was the blues that seemed to call B.B. King and others, even though some didn’t understand the music and the man.

In 1999, in a public conversation with William Ferris, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, B.B. King recounted how he came to sing the blues. He said, “Growing up on the plantation in Mississippi, I would work Monday through Saturday noon. ... I’d go to town on Saturday afternoons, sit on the street corner, and I’d sing and play. ... I’d have me a hat or box or something in front of me. People that would request a gospel song would always be very polite to me, and they’d say, ‘Son, you’re mighty good. Keep it up. You’re gonna be great one day.’ But they never put anything in the hat.

“We Didn’t Start the Fire”

“But people that would ask me to sing a blues song would always tip me and maybe give me a beer. They always would do something of that kind. Sometimes I’d make fifty or sixty dollars one Saturday afternoon. Now you know why I’m a blues singer.”

B.B. King and the church in particular saw themselves as uncommon with each other; there wasn’t mutual understanding, but the gift of the Spirit works toward comprehension and common ground.

The gift of speech is not given in order not to be understood. Why would anyone speak in an unknown tongue if they knew they would never be heard? As the Pentecost story unfolds, another gift of the Spirit is obvious -- the gift of hearing in one’s own language. The gift of ecstatic speech at Pentecost is traditionally understood and known, but what’s also obviously stressed is how others understand what’s being spoken.

Because the crowd understands, they have to ask, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” (2:7). The speakers were not of the same ethnicity and culture, yet they heard and understood. They weren’t talking past each other. The focus of Pentecost urges us to seek understanding, not mere hearing. A turn to this pentecostal Spirit, then, is a turn to the speaker but also to the listener. Understanding is just as important as speaking, and both are gifts of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Yale professor Nora Tubbs Tisdale writes, “Revelation (or in this case Understanding)... can never be earned or deserved or attained by our own human striving. It is always a gift of a God who chooses, in freedom, to reveal Godself to us -- to condescend to our (comprehension).”

We Didn’t Start the Fire!

To be able to speak across barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, denomination, or politics is to challenge stereotype and risk ridicule. It is a brave and

“We Didn’t Start the Fire”

disorienting act. How often do we engage in it in our churches? How often do we cross cultures and open our hearts and minds to be with them?

Whether we like it or not, this is what the Holy Spirit required of Christ's frightened disciples on the birthday of the Church. Essentially, to stop huddling in their version of sameness and safety. To throw open their windows and doors. To feel the pressure of God's hand against their backs, pour themselves into the streets, and speak. When the Holy Spirit came, silence was no longer possible; they were on fire. Its ironic that Peter the one who denied Jesus three times would be the one to step up and identify the Holy Spirit. He was set ablaze and knew it!

In the end, the Pentecost story required surrender on both sides. Those who spoke had to face languages outside of their comfort zones. They had to risk vulnerability in the face of difference, and do so with no guarantee of welcome. They had to trust that no matter how awkward, inadequate, or silly they felt, the words bubbling up inside of them — new words, strange words, scary words — were nevertheless essential words — words precisely ordained for the time and place they were in.

Meanwhile, the crowds who listened had to take risks as well. They had to suspend disbelief, drop their cherished defenses, and opt for wonder instead of contempt. They had to widen their circles, and welcome strangers with odd accents into their midst. Not all of them managed it — some sneered because they couldn't bear to be bewildered, to have their neat categories of belonging and exclusion explode in their faces. Instead, like their ancestors at Babel, who scattered at the first sign of difference, they retreated into the well-worn narrative of denial: "Nothing new is happening here. This isn't God. These are blubbering idiots who've had too much to drink."

“We Didn’t Start the Fire”

But even in that atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism, some people spoke, and some people listened, and into those astonishing exchanges, God breathed fresh life.

What is the Spirit saying to God’s people? Maybe that we live in a world where words have become toxic, where the languages of our cherished "isms" threaten to divide and destroy us? That the troubles of our day — global, civilizational, catastrophic — cry out for the comfort of a bold and creative Church willing to engage across barriers? That if we don't learn the art of speaking each other’s languages, we’ll burn ourselves down to nothing?

It is no small thing that the Holy Spirit loosened tongues on the birthday of the Church. In the face of difference, God compelled his people to engage. From Day One, the call was to press in, linger, listen, and listen some more.

Can we open our ears and hear what the Spirit is saying to us, his people? God is doing something new, and we can be a part of it. We can be Together. We can be on fire for the healing of the world and know We Didn’t Start This Fire, the Holy Spirit did and it was always burning since the world’s been turning.

Let us pray:

Empowering God,
you gave the church
the abiding presence of your Holy Spirit.
Help us to hear what your Spirit is telling us.
Help us to understand what your Spirit is saying for us to do
And help us to feel that fire burning in us, that makes us go and proclaim your name to the ends
of the earth.

Amen!