

## Describing the Indescribable

Well, it's a big day in the church. It is, in my mind at least, one of the greatest celebrations that we have throughout the year. It is Pentecost Sunday, because it is on that day that we are reminded that Jesus went away but didn't, and that once the human person – as we experience them can touch them, can feel them, can see them – is gone, the Spirit, the soul, the part that celebrates and brings beauty and joy remains. So that nothing, really, is ever gone. And if that's a concept that you have trouble wrapping your head around, join the crowd, as even those of us who stand here and try to proclaim the Word each Sunday have difficulty describing that which is indescribable.

I was reminded this week of the Fire in Fort Mac. I was reminded because a friend and colleague in ministry was in Fort Mac when the fire happened. As stuff sometimes happens on Facebook, you know the post that you put up five years ago pops up as if you care. In this instance I was really glad it did, because it reminded her of that experience and of the writing that she did post-Pentecost, so into the season of Pentecost following Pentecost Sunday. And you know, I forget (and I suppose most of us do forget) that the original Pentecost experience was pretty powerful. I mean, it was flames, it was fire, it was the equivalent of an earthquake, it was thunder and rolling, it was a pretty chaotic moment which had everybody running into the streets saying, "Oh, what's going on?"

Well, so did the fire in Fort Mac, and here is what Donnalee Williams wrote on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May in 2016:

"I confess to feeling some discomfort this Pentecost when we remember the story of the birthday of the Christian church and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Stories of a mighty wind and tongues of fire. When I consider tame wind and flame fashioned of paper and cloth, I shiver when I think of the wildfire that rages still. How often we, how often I, shrink enormous things into easily handled images – like wind, fire, water, stars – and do not comprehend their vastness. I want to read her last line one more time because it went somewhere deep in me. "How often we, how often I, shrink enormous things into easily handled images – like wind, fire, water, stars – and do not comprehend their vastness." Often the vastness is so frightening to us and so incredibly indescribable to us that we have to compact it into something smaller that we feel like we can get a handle on, like maybe control. We can't control the Spirit. We can't control Pentecost. We can't control what happened in the hearts and the minds of the people then and we, I hope, can't control it now either.

I want to go back because I was told, I was told by the Reverend Dr. Bob Schnell, professor of Old Testament (because that's what it was called in the '70s.) You never read the story from Acts without reading the story from Genesis. So here is the brief story from Genesis:

It's the tower of Babel, you all know it. It's the one where everyone wanted to build the tower to take them to the heavens. And God said, "Oh no, you don't. No, no, no, no, no. And God tried to wipe everything out by making it Impossible to understand one another. Messed up the languages amongst us, so we didn't know what the other was saying. I don't know if any of you are TV buffs like I am, but there's an ad on right now about two guys building a deck and the one guy is saying to his friend, "Hand me that little thingie. It's the little round thingie, it's clear, and it's – it's *that* small..." And his friend is going through every carpentry tool sitting there and he finally picks up the guy's coffee cup and the guy says, "Yes! Yeah, that little round thingie!"

When our language gets confused, it's an attempt to describe the indescribable if you don't have words. I mean, apparently he couldn't just think *coffee cup* in that moment. When we get overwhelmed, when we're beyond the ability to think clearly, when emotion falls in on us to such a degree, that we lost the ability to communicate in the way that we always have. It's kind of like a Pentecost moment. Stuff happens in here that we just try, desperately, to describe out there and we fail miserably time and time again.

I ask people on a regular basis, "What has been your experience of God this week?" and I usually get, well, if I'm lucky, I get blubbing, which is good, because I know that something really touched them, and I can stay with that for a bit. But usually people are simply at a loss for words because we cannot describe the indescribable. Well, back to the tower of Babel: it came down. Well, it never got up. It was never built. Because God confused the languages and then in Pentecost, some whatever-amount-of-time-later, God made it possible for us to understand one another again, regardless of the language that we speak. Now, I don't know about that. I mean frankly, some days, my spouse and I don't understand one another particularly well; and we both presumably speak English. So I'm not sure now this un-confusion of the languages has worked out, really. On the other hand, when it comes to the language of the heart...when it comes to me attempting to tell you about the deepest, most powerful experiences in my life, experiences of fire, of wind, of the vastness of the universe, somehow it seems that very few words are required to convey the importance of the experience. I suggest to you that Pentecost is the day that we are reminded that what matters more than virtually anything else is our experience of God. Our experience of the holy, the moments when we have been touched so deeply that there is nothing for it but to take a moment, or maybe an hour or a day to simply be with those around us. We have to be intentional about that, because the world won't let us. The world keeps wanting to break in on those quiet moments. The cell phones, the iPads dinging, the noise of street traffic. We have to be very intentional to say "This time is for me because I had a profound experience just now and I need time in order to sort out how I might share that out here."

Sometimes the best I'll ever do is to wrap you up in a hug. And that's what makes this time more difficult because even as we attempt to share our inmost experiences of the world it has become more difficult for us to do that in the ways that have been most profoundly accepted. And so I invite you into this time of Pentecost with, yes, celebration because it does mean that the Spirit of all that is holy, that is everything that has ever been and will ever be is present now in this moment. Wow. And I invite you all to take the time with the folks who are in your circle to share that in ways that are both fulfilling and holy. Thanks be. Amen.