

“Caught in a Firestorm”

Acts 2:1-13

Series: Recharge – Plug Into the Power of the Spirit Week 6. The Plan of the Holy Spirit

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When you hear the word Everglades you might think of alligators but not nuclear annihilation. Yet deep in the heart of Everglades National Park is a Nike Hercules Missile base. HM69 or “Alpha Battery” was designed to protect America from a southern attack. It was built in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October, 1962. That was the moment when the world came the closest to nuclear annihilation. US and Soviet weapons and warriors were on the highest alert. A single mistake on either side could ignite a holocaust beyond their control. As we all know, the crisis was peacefully resolved and World War III did not come to pass.

HM69 continued to guard America until 1979. Living in constant readiness for a nuclear attack was a demanding job. It was also dangerous. A sign on the wall reads:

First Aid for Electric Shock

1. Use Wooden Pole or Rope provided to remove victim
2. Apply Artificial Respiration
3. Summon Medical Aid

Hopefully they weren’t using the pole to play stick ball the day you got shocked. Security was extremely tight. Guards and German Shepherds were required to stand outside and patrol the grounds 24/7 in searing heat, raging hurricanes and thunder storms. One guard and his dog were directly hit by lightning. The other guards found both still alive. The dog’s hair stood straight out. They brought them inside, got them cleaned up...and then sent them back outside to finish the shift.

Centuries ago, humans learned to make fire. Since then, we’ve used it to cook meals, heat homes, run industry and generate more power. The more we learn about fire, the greater good we can do with it...and the greater evil. The ancient people learned how to bake bricks with fire. They built cities with bricks instead of heavy stones. Yet soon, the Bible tells us, they used their new fire technology to rebel against God.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

Genesis 11:1, 3-4

The tower they build is a ziggurat – a man-made mountain with a temple on the top. Using fire brick technology they want to make a name for themselves and build a temple to worship their idols instead of God. Fire plus Ego is a dangerous formula. God’s not

afraid of what humans will do to Him. He's concerned they will use technology to hurt and kill each other.

The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. Genesis 11:6-9

When we play with fire, it quickly spreads beyond our control. A single match can set an entire forest ablaze. A firestorm can obliterate a whole city.

On the eve of St. Valentines Day, February 13th, 1945, in the final months of the Second World War in Europe, US and British planes bombed the German city of Dresden. Before the war it was a beautiful Baroque city of art and culture straddling the Elbe River in Saxony. Now it was a military objective. Four raids, involving 3,600 planes, descended on the city. They dropped 650,000 incendiary bombs – eight million pounds of high-explosives. The result was a firestorm, a growing, swirling holocaust of fire. 15 square miles of the city, 90% of the buildings, were annihilated. The Dresden Historian commission reports at least 22,700 died in the flames, of which 20,100 are known by name. Valentines Day, February 14th, that year was also Ash Wednesday.

I do not wish debate if it was the right thing to do given all the immense horrors of World War II. The firestorm of Dresden, the Nazi Blitz over London, the attack on Pearl Harbor and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki prove that fire, in the hands of humans, can unleash incredible destruction and suffering beyond our control. This year we are seeing the deadly carnage caused when Fire and Ego mix – in the cities and countryside of Ukraine, in the gun violence on our urban streets, in the slaying of innocent victims in a Buffalo shopping mall, a California Presbyterian Church and a Texas elementary school. When human ego plays with fire the results are horrific.

Even the disciples want to play with fire. When Jesus runs into opposition from a village of Samaritans, the enemies of the Jews, James and John want to wipe them out.

"Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village. Luke 9:54-56

This is not Jesus' way. He did not come to fight but to unite. His plan is to bring humans back together, to unite them His way with His fire – the fire of the Holy Spirit.

This day, Pentecost, is the beginning of His plan to unite people of every nation. On Pentecost God sends the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit to reverse the division and separation that started at the Tower of Babel.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole

house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Acts 2:1-4

The fire of the Holy Spirit is more powerful than a hurricane, tornado or nuclear chain reaction. Yet it does not destroy. It does not divide. It creates. It unites.

The fire of the Spirit ignites faith. Christians today often say, "If I was alive in Jesus' day, if I could hear Him teach, see His miracles, then I would believe without a doubt." The reverse is true. The first disciples saw the miracles, sat at His feet, broke bread, and heard Him teach and still they did not truly believe until the Holy Spirit came. Before the Spirit, they were timid. After the Spirit they were triumphant. Before the Spirit they denied Jesus. After the Spirit, they defied the authorities. And the apostle John, who wanted to call a firestorm down on the Samaritans, was later sent by the Holy Spirit to baptize them in the Holy Spirit (Acts 8). Those he once hated and wished to annihilate, he now, by the power of Spirit, called brothers and sisters in Christ.

You are just as blessed as the disciples. The fire of the Spirit will light the fuse of faith in you. The firestorm of Pentecost does not destroy. It builds the church and unites enemies. In Dresden there was a beautiful cathedral called The Frauenkirche – a Baroque Lutheran church completed in 1743. During the firestorm the temperature outside reached a 1000 degrees Celsius. The church glowed red and exploded raining down 6,000 tons of stone. While the rest of the city was resurrected, the Communists in East Germany left the Frauenkirche in ruins as a propaganda monument against the Americans and British. Yet in 1985, they started to rebuild the church. It became a symbol of reconciliation and unity between the Germans, the Americans and the British, whose cathedrals were bombed by the Germans. In 1999 Gunter Blobel, a German-born American who saw the original church as a boy, won the Nobel prize for medicine and gave the entire million dollar award to rebuild the church and a new synagogue.

The Cross which once graced the top of the massive dome was discovered in the rubble charred and twisted. It still stands, today, by the altar, as a symbol of death and resurrection through the flames. But the new gold cross and orb, meticulously copied from the original, was fashioned by Alan Smith, a British goldsmith whose father Frank was on one of the planes in the bombing. Sixty years after it collapsed in fire, the Frauenkirche rose from the ashes to the glory of God.

Fire in the hands of humans can cause intense destruction, suffering and misery. But the fire of the Holy Spirit ignites faith. It builds up the church, blesses people, and brings peace between enemies.

The fire of the Holy Spirit cannot be kept indoors.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own

language. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” Acts 2:4-8, 12-13

Did you ever wonder why so many people from places so hard to pronounce were all in Jerusalem that day? Pentecost is not just God’s reversal of the Tower of Babel. Pentecost was a Jewish festival before it became the birthday of the Church. It’s called Shavuot. It was one of three major festivals of the year. Jews from all over gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate when God gave the Law, the Old Covenant, to Moses. On that day, there was a great firestorm on Mount Sinai. Now, on the mountain of Jerusalem, Jews from all over the world witness another firestorm. God gives a New Covenant. Not one carved in stone but written on the hearts of His people. Not the letter of the Law but the Spirit of God. This is so amazing it drives the Church of 120 people to leave the building.

A crowd gathers around the house. Then two miracles occur. The first is in the mouths of the believers: they speak in tongues praising God for all His wonders. The second miracle is in the ears of the hearers. Some hear only gibberish and think the disciples started drinking too early. But others understand the disciples not in Aramaic but in their native language. The Holy Spirit works on both ends – sending and receiving.

You say to me, “I can’t share my faith or speak about what I believe. I don’t know the Bible, I can’t answer their questions, I’ll get all tongue tied.” You don’t believe in the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit is working, He unties your tongue and unblocks their ears. The Spirit doesn’t always do that. Like the wind, the Spirit blows where it will. But if you don’t open your mouth, the Spirit will have to work around you instead of through you. We must take our faith beyond these walls by the power of the Spirit.

This week – will you let the fire of the Holy Spirit use you to spark faith in someone? Will you let the fire of the Holy Spirit use you to bring hope to someone? Will you let the fire of the Holy Spirit use you to make peace with someone? Will you let the fire of the Holy Spirit use you to share God’s love to someone? The Spirit is not sending us to fight but to unite all peoples in Jesus’ Name.