

Tongues of Fire

The world in which we live is a world where one spark can cause an uncontrollable and widespread inferno. Last week, lightning storms across our state and others started over 100 wildfires. Because of the quick response by brave individuals, many were controlled swiftly and put out. Unfortunately, several fires spread quickly and grew out of control. High winds and dry conditions made the situation worse. Even now, fires are burning across portions of Washington and Idaho. As a result, people have had to evacuate their homes. Mile upon square mile of brushland, grass, and farmland has been scorched. Smoke and dust have made the air hard to breathe in some places. Fires – all of them – started by a spark of lightning. Though they started in one small place, they quickly spread.

It's not my intention to bring this up to you this morning simply to remind you of the wildfires burning near our homes and towns. Most of you read the news. If not, you hear about it from friends and neighbors. Truly, you can see the smoke for yourselves. This morning, I tell you this because it is a clear and present reminder of the truth about fire. Fire only needs a spark, one little spark, to begin. Once it begins, a fire is very difficult to contain. It's no wonder that many of us use the phrase "spreads like wildfire." Once a fire starts, its spread is inevitable.

James, the brother of our Lord, speaks in these terms this morning. He didn't need to be reminded about the reality of fire. In the dry wildernesses of ancient Palestine, a single spark could turn into a large wildfire. Armies – Greek, Roman, Persian – had been coming through Palestine for centuries. With small sparks, they set out to burn cities and fields as they ravaged the landscape. And near James' hometown – Jerusalem – there was a valley just outside the gates. This valley was called *Gehenna*. In the Old Testament, this valley was used as a place for child sacrifice. It was here that parents brought their children "through the fire," sacrificing them to Molech and other pagan gods. During James' life, the valley was apparently full of heaps of garbage, garbage which burned continuously. Yes, James didn't need to be reminded of the nature of fire. Vivid reminders were all around him. This morning, we hear him speak words of wisdom based on his experience with fire. "How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire." There's the wisdom of the day. Mull it over. Struggle with it. It may be easy to understand. But it reminds us that we live in a world full of wildfires. We live in a world where one spark can start an uncontrollable inferno. *The tongue is a fire.*

There was a pastor in a small town in corn country. He had been the pastor there for several years. By all accounts, he was well-liked. The youth connected with him. The adults could relate with him. The townspeople saw him as a happy pastor who did his job well. Everything was great, until the pastor started to become reclusive. People began to see less and less of him. For someone who was outgoing and sociable, it was a strange turn of events. As the pastor stayed out of the public eye more and more, people began to talk. Tongues began to question the situation. Sparks began to fly. And it only takes one spark to start a massive fire. Most people assumed that the pastor had become ill. But, the pastor wasn't talking. Of course, this only made it worse. And, with one rumor, one spark, the fire began to spread. "I heard the pastor has HIV." And it spread. Quickly. Until the fiery rumor became out of control. People turned on the pastor. They accused him of everything from drug use to extramarital affairs to homosexuality. And don't think it was just anyone spreading the fire. It was his own people. His own members. The very Christians who came to worship and praise God every Sunday morning. Once a fire starts, once it spreads and becomes a wildfire, it's near impossible to put out. And this fire couldn't be contained. With all the smoke, with all the flames and destruction, the pastor was forced to leave the very place that he had helped build, grow, and sustain. And the deed was done. The fire was put out the only way people knew how. The pastor was gone. The pastor who *wasn't* having an affair. The pastor who *wasn't* using drugs. The pastor who *wasn't* a homosexual. The pastor was sick, but he didn't have HIV. He had cancer, cancer that was devastating to him and to his family. But, before he had the strength to let the congregation in on the sobering news, the damage had been done. The spark became a fire, and the fire grew out of control. And this is what our text warns us about. *The tongue is a fire.*

This proverbial word about the tongue, is one that we need to hear this morning. This word reminds us what kind of world we live in, what kind of reality we have to deal with. This morning, we are reminded in our text what kind of words can singe our minds and even our souls. *The tongue is a restless evil, full of dreadful poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.* And you know the feeling. You know what it's like for sparks to fly from the tongue. "Did you hear what *she* did last week? I know, I can't believe it either!" Maybe it's not gossip behind someone's back. Maybe sparks fly right in front of someone's face. "You'll never amount to anything." "You're ugly." "You're dumb." "I wouldn't be your

friend even if you paid me.” Or maybe even something as bad as “You are worthless. You’re nothing.” No matter what anyone has told you in school, no matter what some motivational speaker says, no matter what your parents might have told you, words can hurt. If the tongue is a fire, then words are the spark. Words, however small or quick, can start a fire that burns and can utterly destroy. They can engulf even the most lofty, confident self-esteem and bring someone to the brink of absolute despair. Maybe you’ve seen someone try to put out the fire with their tears. Maybe they’re still crying. Maybe they’re even afraid that sparks will continue to fly.

Indeed, it seems utterly incomprehensible that we would have to think in these terms. James writes, *With [the same tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and curse.* For many of us this morning, it comes as a hard word. With our mouths, we confess our Christian faith. We praise God with songs, hymns, psalms, and prayers. We portray lives lit by the fire of the Holy Spirit. Yet, our actions sometimes reveal otherwise. James says, *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.* The words of a fiery tongue, an unrestrained tongue spewing sparks of sinful speech, makes our religion essentially worthless. These tongues aren’t shining with the light of the fire of the Holy Spirit. James calls them *set on fire by hell.* This is the reality we live in. This is the fiery battle we experience in our own mouths and deep in our souls. When we don’t restrain our tongues, our tongues spark the beginning of a fire we can’t control. *The tongue is a fire.*

But, this morning something familiar places us in a story where the fire of hell is contained and extinguished. You see the green paraments and the green stole. You see the banners on the pillars and up front reminding us that we live in the grace of the Holy Spirit. It’s the season of Pentecost. It’s the season where we recognize that the Lord grows his Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s the season where we ourselves remember that we are a part of a church that, from the very beginning, began with a spark. It began with fiery tongues. *When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.* And there, at the beginning of the story of God’s Church – our Church – there was a spark. A tongue of fire, resting on each of the Apostles. It was a fire that wouldn’t be contained.

It spread, and it spread quickly. *Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. On the cross, this Christ had sparks shot at him from fiery tongues. If you are the Son of God, save yourself! Come down! Hail, “King” of the Jews! Prophecy for us!* These were sparks that started a fire that couldn't be contained. Christ was engulfed in the fires of hell. And he burned to death in the heat of these words. But God's breath blew out the fire. The fire started by their tongues – by your tongues. His breath revived Jesus Christ in the cool air of an early Sunday morning. And the people heard the message of Christ's death and resurrection in their own tongues. The fire singed their souls and set them – it set you – aflame in a new way. *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.* With a small spark, the tongues of fire spread in the power of the Holy Spirit. The waters of baptism began to extinguish the flames of hell. The Church grew exponentially. The people devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching and to prayer. *And day by day, attending to the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.* Yes, this is the beginning of the story of our Church. This is the season of fiery tongues.

In this season, the season we live in, we know that *the tongue is a flame*. Its hellish sparks can start a fire that we can't dream to control. But, in this very place, the Lord doused and continues to douse the flames of hell in the waters of your baptism. And with it he set new tongues of fire on your heads and in your mouths. A fire has been set inside of your hearts. The words of wisdom from James remind us to guard our tongues, to bridle them and restrain them. And indeed you should. Peter also writes, *Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit.* Sometimes, to control a fire, you need to set a new one. You need another fire to burn the stubble and brush before it becomes more fuel. The Holy Spirit has set a new tongue of fire in your heart. It's fire from heaven that won't be put out. May that fire remain on your tongue. May it control the hellish fire that would just as soon spark your tongue to evil. *How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire. The tongue is a fire, one way or another.* May that heavenly fire spark. May it spread. May it burn. May your hearts and tongues be set aflame in the fire of the Spirit. Amen.