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Warm weather has arrived. The sun is shining. The air feels cool. It's a great day for a cookout, so someone suggests, "Fire up the grill." Sounds like a great idea, so you buy some hamburgers and hotdogs, buns and ketchup, chips and potato salad, lemonade, and get ready to fire up the grill. You turn on the gas on the outdoor grill, click the automatic ignitor, a tiny flame leaps into the grill, and immediately the fire goes out. You try again. Nothing. No flame. No heat. No cookout.

Fire is a wonderful gift, giving us the ability to do more than just cook our food, but when the fire goes out or won't even start, we may find ourselves frustrated and confused.

Jesus' followers hadn't met for a cookout when they gathered in a room, but the fire they experienced was more than they anticipated. It had been numerous weeks after Jesus had died and they had experienced his resurrection, yet they were still trying to figure out what to do next. It might have felt like trying to plan a cookout without any fire: frustrating, confusing. I imagine a conversation among Jesus' followers:

"We need to do something to tell about Jesus instead of just sitting here waiting."

"I don't agree. We need to wait, for Jesus said he would send us a Comforter, an Advocate. We need to be patient."

"But how long do we wait? Weeks ago when we saw Jesus he invited us to go and make disciples, but we can't do that by waiting around."

"I know. I agree that Jesus promised to be with us, but right now I'm not so sure he's still here. I'm worried about all those who are trying to hunt us down. Where is Jesus when we need him the most?"

"Jesus made a promise to us. He won't let us down, but I agree—it would be nice to somehow sense his presence among us."

And then it happened. It was Pentecost day, a Jewish festival that celebrated the harvest, giving thanks for the blessings of food. It was also a day of giving thanks for God's teachings through the scriptures. People had gathered in Jerusalem from many nations, speaking a multitude of languages and bringing many different foods and cultures.

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As people were gathering in the streets, Jesus' followers were assembled in a room, possibly uncertain whether they should show themselves in public due to those still hunting for them. Suddenly, a sound like the wind filled the house. A new sense of energy filled the room, as though flames of fire danced over their heads. They felt inspired to speak various languages, and so they went out into the streets and began speaking to all those who had gathered for the annual Pentecost festival.

Not surprisingly, the crowd was a bit perplexed. One person shouted, "They're filled with wine. They're drunk. Pay no attention." Someone else asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" One commentary noted that

The crowd's identification of the believers as "Galileans" (v. 7) is [a] subtle, and perhaps comical, social commentary. Galilee was a rural backwater in the minds of Jerusalemites and, presumably, [for those who] travel to Jerusalem for the Feast of...Pentecost. Galileans spoke with a distinctive accent that this cosmopolitan crowd would notice and likely scorn.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the obstacles and rude comments, some people listened. Peter reminded them how ancient prophets had envisioned a time when God's Spirit would pour out on all people, how they would be inspired. Some heard and understood. And they responded. They came together as a community of faith, with thousands being baptized on that day that we recognize as the birth of the church.

It's a though God said, "Fire it up," and the church was born though the movement and inspiration of the Spirit. But I wonder: after 2000-some years, does that Spirit still inspire us? Or have we lost touch with that fire? Have the embers of that flame begun to flicker? Writer Brian McLaren wondered the same thing as he wrote:

In the millennia since Christ walked with us on this Earth, we've often tried to box up the "wind" [of the Spirit] in manageable doctrines. We've exchanged the fire of the Spirit for the ice of religious pride. We've turned the wine back into water, and then let the water go stagnant and lukewarm. We've traded the gentle dove of peace for the predatory hawk or eagle of empire. When we have done so, we have ended up with just another religious system, as problematic as any other: too often petty,

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argumentative, judgmental, cold, hostile, bureaucratic, self-seeking, an enemy of aliveness.

In a world full of big challenges, in a time like ours, we can't settle for a heavy and fixed religion. We can't try to contain the Spirit in a box. We need to experience the mighty rushing wind of Pentecost. We need our hearts to be made incandescent by the Spirit's fire.<sup>2</sup>

How do we sense the Spirit's presence among us rather than placing the Spirit in a box? How do we fire up when life around us seems so difficult? When shootings continue to plague our nation, when individuals are afraid of people who don't like them and shoot them, when innocent children are killed in their school classrooms, our spirits may feel drained as we wonder, *Where is God's Spirit?* While struggling with this issue, another question lingers in our minds: When a war continues to plague Ukraine, where is God's Spirit?

I wish I had an easy answer, but when the flames of peace seem to flicker dimly in the midst

of the violence that continues to plague our world, I feel as confused as those early disciples who were waiting for something to happen. God's Spirit is not something we can control or manipulate, but it does continue to move around us. We may have to wait, like those early disciples sitting in a room, but when the Spirit moves you, be prepared to tell others how you have experienced God's presence in your life.

Maybe that happens over a cup of coffee with a friend. Maybe it's a conversation that comes up when someone you love faces a crisis. Maybe it happens when you offer a prayer with someone. Maybe it happens when you're struggling to make sense of the world, and all you can say is, "God is here, this I know, even when life seems difficult." When God says, "Fire it up," be ready to celebrate the energy that comes from God's Spirit, a Spirit that is already moving within and around you.

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Hack Polaski, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 2.*

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<sup>2</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (Jericho Books, 2014), 205.