



Sermon

Ezekiel 37:1-14 / Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Get Your Motor Running

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...

-- Acts 2:2-4a

Every year at the end of May four classic words spark one of the great spectacles our culture.

"Pass the Hot Dogs?"

Oh no. They're not the words. You must have been thinking of Memorial Day parades and picnics.

"Come, Holy Spirit, Come?"

Nice try. You're getting warmer. After all it is Pentecost, a spectacle in its own right; mighty wind, flames of fire and people speaking other languages and all. But they're not the words either.

The words I'm thinking of come from an event that generally takes place the last Sunday of May, a world famous race where the winner toasts victory by raising a bottle of milk.

Now do know the four words?

"Gentleman, start your engines!"

You're a week late, Fred. The Indy 500 was last Sunday. Today is Pentecost. What on earth could a car race and Pentecost possibly have to do with each other?

Well call me Billy-Bob and put one of those fiery looking NASCAR baseball caps on my head because the two do have something powerful in common. One might never think of it except for the serendipity of calendar coincidence.

Think of this. The thing that set the Indianapolis 500 in motion was the invention of the internal combustion engine. Somehow – and this is way beyond my ability to comprehend mechanics and physics – fuel ignites, combustion happens, and VROOM, VROOM, VROOM it's off to the races. Without ignition there is no movement. Without combustion there is no Indy 500.

Likewise, without ignition and combustion, there is no church. The way the Bible tells it the disciples of Jesus and other people from throughout the world were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the annual Jewish barley harvest festival called Pentecost. It was a holy time to be sure; holier for some than others. There were people in town for the traditional holiday and all the festivities. And then there were Jesus' friends locked away in hiding, feeling heat from their association with a convicted traitor and insurrectionist, people still reeling from his awful crucifixion and death not to mention his beaming up, up and away in the Ascension.

But then something happened. Fifty days after Easter. A surprise. A holy surprise. Call it ignition. Call it combustion. Fiery tongues appeared on Jesus friends who were suddenly filled with high octane holy energy. The Spirit of God was the spark plug for a new movement, new people and new attitude. A fire ignited doused souls. A

blazing spirit burst open locked doors and bolted windows. Internal combustion melted away divisions and barriers with a new language of understanding and being understood as never before.

One of the church's most ancient hymns of Pentecost goes this way: "Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire and lighten with celestial fire..." The song is a prayer that the ignition of the first Pentecost will never lose its flare; that every person can be ignited by the Spirit to deepening, life changing experience with God.

Last Sunday, United Methodist Heritage Sunday we remembered the story of a very unhappy man named John Wesley – unhappy with life, unhappy with his profession as a priest, unhappy with religion/church/faith, unhappy in relationships, feeling like his life was just going through the motions. We heard how John Wesley experienced his "heart strangely warmed," his heart set afire, his imagination ignited to a new beginning. And here we are in this church, one of the first of thousands like it across the entire world, some 271 years later, progeny of a religious awakening that saved England from civil war and birthed an indigenous American church called Methodist Episcopal. Why? How? Because God's Spirit got John Wesley's motor running.

Ah, you say: "Great story and all that. We'll never come near being an historic figure like John Wesley. What happened in his life is way beyond our experience."

I couldn't disagree more. but the Spirit's igniting fresh wind, kindling God's Spirit and stirring new fire it's not beyond us at all. Matter of fact, I'm thinking it's as common as the expression "What's gotten into you?"

Anyone ever ask that about you?

"What's gotten INTO you?" It's what John Wesley wondered about the Moravians he met on board ship returning from the dismissal failure of his ministry in Georgia. "What's gotten into YOU/THEM?" How can they be singing If You're

Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands, how can they pray with deep calm and inner peace while the ship carrying us is sinking and me, the priest, feel nothing but fear and torment. "What's gotten into YOU/THEM?"

"What's gotten into you?" This must be what Wesley's own mother and bosom brother Charles wondered noticing the persnickety John live into his warming change of heart and soul. "John, what's gotten into you?"

The question usually stems from some unexpected, unusual behavior. Your cranky co-worker or friend is all the sudden a bundle of positive and pleasant energy –actually saying nice things, building people up instead of tearing them down. "What's gotten into YOU?"

Your skinflint boss or brother or sister is suddenly brimming with generosity. Picks up the check. Remembers to tell you how important you are. Thanks you for what you mean to them. "What's gotten into YOU?"

Your cold, distant spouse or partner is all of the sudden cuddly and snuggling. "What's gotten into YOU?"

In a way this question is as apt for Pentecost as comparing it to "Gentlemen start your engines" because the very people who for days and weeks hid themselves in fear for their lives are now out and about and acting in astonishing ways – ways no one would have expected. Jesus friends no longer lived in secret. They called attention to themselves by their behavior. "What's gotten into YOU/THEM?"

What? The Holy Spirit! "They were filled with the Holy Spirit," is the Bible's explanation. They were ignited by the combustion of God's wind and fire.

All this hits home today because this same Spirit was poured on us at baptism, the very same Spirit we will invoke and pour on Laela. We will baptize her just as we were baptized, in the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, AND God the Holy Spirit – God the Igniter.

Most days we'll reckon baptism, if we reckon baptism at all, as the once and done day we went under the blanket protection of God so that, if God-forbid, something were to happen to us at a tender age, we'll get automatically suckled to the heavenly bosom.

Or, we'll think of baptism as the coming-out party for baby day. Welcome to the world and all that. Aren't babies wonderful?

But today, thanks to the serendipity of calendar coincidence we remember with Laela's baptism, and our own, the Spirit filling ignition of baptism; that we just don't choose God but God chooses us to be God's very own kin living the Holy Spirit; that we are one and the same with the three thousand people the Bible reports on this very day, who heard Peter's Pentecost sermon, who came be baptized, who signed on with the Jesus-way, who opening ourselves to the wind and spark of God's presence, who got their motors running and so renewed the face of the earth for heaven's sake.

Question: If we receive the same Spirit as did the first disciples at Pentecost, why can't we do the same marvelous deeds? The whole point is we can! Says Paul to the Corinthian church:

...God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful: wise counsel, simple trust, understanding, healing, discernment...

(I Corinthians 12:3-7 *The Message*)

And to the Galatian church, Paul calls these things the fruits of the Spirit. They show up in things like:

affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity, willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people (Galatians 5:22-23, *The Message*).

What's gotten into you? Some Holy Spirit, that's what. Open yourself to receive it in the same way we are so open for Laela to be blessed today.

What's gotten into you? Some Holy Spirit that's been idling since your baptism, waiting to fire. Waiting to ignite. In situations where bitterness, hatred or violence prevail, kindness, goodness and generosity are not only marvelous gifts, they are heroic. Generosity is countercultural where greed and "what's-in-it-for-me" hold sway. How much harm might be avoided if there were a bit more patience? A gift so simple, but a gift so profound. Patience. A gift of the Spirit. Patience. Not needing to force our own way.

"What's gotten into you?" The Holy Spirit, the dynamic power of God is ignited in you, in me, in all its fullness. With the Spirit, the Pentecost story says, come the gifts to renew and transform the world. The first disciples had their day and seized it with such gusto that they named a holy day after it. This is our day. We have the chance to show others what's gotten into us, what God has ignited in us. Pentecost is petal-to-the-metal time.

Growing up in the church, I got the idea Pentecost was the church's birthday. But as I have grown it feels like the cake, ice cream, candles and same old song is a little too tame for race day. This is the church's day of ignition. On this day, God's Spirit fired a frightened, discouraged, depressed, unclear-about-their-future band of friends and set them off to live with wind, fire and power enough to be like Jesus, to change the world.

A holy wind is still stirring in the air, still ripples the baptismal waters. A holy fire is crackling. Listen. A word about what God wants to do in your life is speaking in YOUR mother tongue. Holy wind is swirling in your tidy certainties. What's got into YOU?

Ladies, gentleman, start your engines.

■■■ Amen ■■■