I want to begin today with a story.
It’s one of those stories that’s had a way of sticking around.
I’m sure you have those stories, in your friend groups and in your families, too.
These are the stories that we find ourselves telling late into the night as we sit around –
Laughing and crying about them,
Even though we’ve all heard how they end many times before.

This particular story comes from my husband’s family lore.

Let me set the scene for you.
My husband Joe’s parents and siblings were sitting in the living room watching TV.
When all of the sudden, Joe, my husband, who was about seven at the time,
Walks quickly and nervously into the living room,
Saying with a restrained and forced calm: “Fire.”

His family was confused by Joe and the sudden announcement –
“What?” They asked.
“Fire” he nodded, with just a bit more urgency this time.

Then his dad started to get up to investigate,
And Joe added some important information –
“In the bathroom.
Fire.”

Then mayhem broke out,
And his parents – now my in-laws – figured out that, indeed, there was a real fire in the bathroom,
That their adventurous and sometimes trouble-making young son had started by accident.

The story goes that, after the fire had been contained, his parents sat him down to talk about what happened.
Once they sorted it out – that Joe had discovered the magic of hairspray and lighters – Joe’s dad said,
“Why didn’t you come running to us when you realized the fire was out of control?!?”
To which Joe replied,
“Last time I ran in the house, I got in trouble. So I didn’t want to add that to the list of things I’d be in trouble for this time.”

I bring this story up today because I thought of it again when I re-read the story of Pentecost for this Sunday.

There’s a quality to the writing in Acts that reminds me of Joe and his repeated “fire.”

Luke, the writer of Acts, is trying really hard to keep calm. He’s like:
“no big deal, but all the disciples were together, and then “suddenly from heaven there came a big sound, and it filled the entire house,” and “tongues,” yes, I said tongues, “of fire came out of the disciples.” Then they all started speaking different languages.

“Fire.”

But you can tell the writer of Acts is sort of restrained as he writes about it, because it’s a legitimately crazy story. It’s so crazy, that he knows that people won’t believe it, (And we know they don’t, because the story tells us that people just thought the disciples were drunk), So he’s trying to tone it down a little.

Because, imagine how you could tell this story:

“OH MY GOOODDD! THERE WAS THE LOUDEST SOUND EVER! IT CAME FROM HEAVEN! WE WERE ALL JUST SITTING THERE AND THEN OUR HEADS…THEY CAUGHT ON FIRE! TONGUES COMING OUT OF HEADS! AND WE STARTED SPEAKING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES! THEN EVERYONE CAME TO RUN AND SEE WHAT WAS HAPPENING!”

That’s more like what the writer of Acts probably felt. But, like my husband Joe, he was trying to just keep it all in. So instead of running around screaming “Fire!!! Out of their heads!” he settles for the more restrained “Fire.”

The thing about a good story is it gets told over and over again, And it never really loses its meaning. Sure these stories are different – One is a story from one childhood, And the other launched an entire movement. But back at the beginning, there was an event, And it turned into a story and it was told again and again.
In a way, what we have here are two stories that are part of community lore. One, the lore of my in-law’s family, The other, the family lore of our religious movement.

Today we tell again the story that marks the beginning of the church as we know it. It’s the feast of Pentecost – the birthday of the church – The day the Holy Spirit came and filled the disciples, and many people in Jerusalem.

But today isn’t just about retelling an old story in our church lore. We’re not just sitting around our living rooms talking about something that happened a long time ago. We are re-telling an important story for our community, But it’s not just stuck in the past.

This is a story that stretches all the way into the present moment. So the question for us today is whether we still think this story of the Holy Spirit is being written?

“Do we still believe in a God who acts like that?”

One of our most notable Episcopal preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, asked it this way in one of her Pentecost sermons:

“Do we still believe in a God who blows through closed doors and sets our heads on fire? Do we still believe in a God with power to transform us? Or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests, but not anyone we really expect to change our lives?”

Do we still believe in a God who could utterly and completely us? Did we ever?

Brown Taylor goes on in her sermon, talking about how those “disciples who hadn’t believed themselves capable of tying their own sandals without Jesus, discovered abilities within themselves they never knew they had. When they opened their mouths to speak, they sounded like Jesus. When they laid their hands upon the sick, it was as if Jesus himself had touched them. They were doing things they had never seen anyone but him do, and there was no explanation for it, except that they had been there on Pentecost.

They had sucked in God’s own breath and they had been transformed by it. The Holy Spirit had entered into them the same way it had entered into Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for the same reason.

It was time for God to be born again –
not in one body this time but in a body of believers who would receive the breath of life from
their Lord and pass it on, using their own bodies to distribute the gift.”²

That’s Pentecost.
That’s the power of this day.

So do we still believe in a God who can act like that?

Do we still believe the story of the Holy Spirit is being written?
Let’s pray that the “Spirit of the Living God falls fresh on us this morning.”
As we lift up our ancient and new prayers, let’s imagine that God might actually answer them.
Let’s believe that God still has the power like those disciples saw that day on the first Pentecost.
Let’s imagine that we might really be the body of Christ, equipped with all the skills we need to
do the ministry we were given to do.

And then, many years from now,
When we’re sitting around your living room with loved ones,
We’ll tell the story again,
Still trying to contain your own excitement and awe,
(Because we know we sound crazy)
That God did answer your prayers.

We’ll tell the story again about how the Holy Spirit came into our lives at an unexpected moment
and set our hearts on fire,
And how we were never the same again.

AMEN.

² Ibid.