69“Splinters of Fire” A sermon based on Acts 2:1-21 and John 14:8-17 delivered at the First Congregational UCC 0f Onekama, Michigan on Pentecost Sunday, June 8, 2025, by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young.

The scripture actually says this, “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 . . .” That’s what it says! Wowza! It is quite a stunning description. And although we picture fire when we hear it, we need to be cautious because it says “**what seemed to be** tongues of fire.”

Jewish-American poet. Denise Levertov, in a poem she wrote entitled “Contraband,” describes the barrier-breaking in-pouring of the Spirit as “filtered light, splinters of fire.” The late clergyman and author, Norman Vincent Peale, he of “The Power of Positive Thinking” fame, once famously described the presence of the Spirit as what it is like looking through the blades of a moving fan. Greg Carey in an article in Christian Century opined, “The Spirit-driven tendency to undermine barriers goes all the way back to Peter and Paul. We may not think of the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit in this way—as a way to get around human created barriers, but that is exactly what is described on the Pentecost story: they are sitting inside the walls of a house when the rush of a violent wind brings with it the sense of tongues as of fire—the wall, as a barrier, is breached by the presence of the Spirit.”

Levertov’s poem describes how from the days of the Garden of Eden humankind has created, by its greedy indifference to the needs of creation, a steel “wall between us and God.” And how it took a “slit where the barrier doesn’t touch the ground” for the “filtered light, splinters of fire” to “squeeze in.” This baptism by fire is foretold in the prophet Joel, and is as Peter carefully points out: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,” it says, “on sons and daughters, young men and old men, both men and women slaves—it will be poured out on everybody with blood and fire and smoky mist—the Spirit will touch them.” And in the Gospel of Luke (3:16-17) we hear John the Baptist forewarning us about the fire to come. He says the one to come, that is the Messiah, will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire; and that this will be a purging fire.

Light that filters through a small opening in a wall can often look like fire. The windows of a building reflecting a sunset can look like they are ablaze with flames. Sunlight filtering down through clouds can often look like flames reaching out to touch the earth—but none of this can explain the phenomena that was Pentecost.

Vague factual explanations don’t cut it when we are faced with the phenomenology of a spiritual experience. My second-call experience on a beach in Rhode Island which involved flamelike sunlight through the clouds and being lifted-up by the Spirit can never ring true to anyone but me. It is beyond explanation. Each of you have had your own experiences of the Spirit which speak to your own faith and no other. No one can walk in another’s spiritual shoes.

The late activist, author and poet James Baldwin’s seminal book about racism is titled, The Fire Next Time. The title comes from a negro slave song entitled “Mary, Don’t you Weep.” One of the lines is “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, **the fire next time**.” While this could be interpreted as a apocalyptic vision, it also echoes the words of John the Baptist in Luke when he says, “I baptize with water,” but the one who comes after me while baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

James Baldwin’s book was actually two separate essays. The first one was in the form of a letter to his nephew—his namesake, James, explaining about how 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, black people were still not free. This book was published in 1963. Almost sixty years later in 2021, then CNN reporter, Don Lemon, wrote a book whose beginning Chapter is modeled after Baldwin’s. In it he writes to his nephew, Trushaad (TruTru). The letter to his nephew is dated May 25, 2020 and begins like this, “Today I heard a dying man call out to his mama, and I wept for the world that will soon belong to you.” Referring, of course, to the murder by Minneapolis police of George Floyd. Lemon’s book is entitled, This Is The Fire: What I Say to My Friends About Racism, and makes the point that nothing much has changed in the fifty-eight years between the printing of his book and that of Baldwin’s. Don Lemon is making the point that, Baldwin said “fire next time” but he says “This is the fire.”

Whether it is racism, the genocide of a war such as the one in Ukraine and the South Sudan, mass public shootings in schools, synagogues, concerts, and churches, the illegal deportation of immigrants, the murder, imprisonment and oppression of people in countries run by dictators, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, the hegemony of the rich over the poor, the imbalance of our justice system, and, yes, wild fires triggered by the climate crisis, the world is “on fire” from sin, greed and injustice—it is in need of a shot of that purging fire represented by the Holy Spirit to set it straight. You’ve heard it said we need to “fight fire with fire.” We need those “splinters of fire,” that “filtered” divine light to “squeeze in” and break through these barriers of human sinfulness. Hear Levertov’s entire poem:

[***Contraband***](https://allpoetry.com/poem/8503429-Contraband-by-Denise-Levertov)

*“The tree of knowledge was the tree of reason.  
That's why the taste of it  
drove us from Eden. That fruit  
was meant to be dried and milled to a fine powder  
for use a pinch at a time, a condiment.  
God had probably planned to tell us later  
about this new pleasure.  
                                  We stuffed our mouths full of it,  
gorged on but and if and how and again  
but, knowing no better.  
It's toxic in large quantities; fumes  
swirled in our heads and around us  
to form a dense cloud that hardened to steel,  
a wall between us and God, Who was Paradise.  
Not that God is unreasonable – but reason  
in such excess was tyranny  
and locked us into its own limits, a polished cell  
reflecting our own faces.* ***God lives  
on the other side of that mirror,  
but through the slit where the barrier doesn't  
quite touch ground, manages still  
to squeeze in – as filtered light,  
splinters of fire, a strain of music heard  
then lost, then heard again.” (Repeat Bolded Lines)***

She describes the sound of this inbreaking fire as “a strain of music heard then lost, then heard again.” Peter, Paul and Mary, protestors of the Vietnam anti-war movement and whose entire career was about peace and justice, came back onto the stage in the mid-eighties with a hit song entitled “Music Speaks Louder than Words.” In this song I hear that “strain of music heard than lost, than heard again.” As Denise Levertov so aptly says at the end of her poem. Here are the lyrics:

*“Music speaks louder than words  
It's the only thing that the whole world listens to  
Music speaks louder than words  
When you sing, people understand*

*Sometimes the love that you feel inside  
Gets lost between your heart and your mind  
And the words don't really say the things you wanted them to  
But then you hear in someone's song  
What you'd been trying to say all along  
And somehow with the magic of music the message comes through*

*Music speaks louder than words  
(Music speaks louder than words)  
It's the only thing that the whole world listens to  
Music speaks louder than words  
When you sing, (when you sing) people understand*

*The longer I live the more I find that people seldom take the time  
To really get to know a stranger and make him a friend  
But the power of a simple song can make everybody feel they belong  
Maybe singin' and playin' can bring us together again*

*(Singin' and playin' can bring us together)  
Singin' and playin' can bring us together again*

*Music speaks louder than words  
It's the only thing that the whole world listens to  
Music speaks louder than words  
When you sing, people understand*

*That music speaks louder than words*

*Music speaks louder than words  
It's the only thing that the whole world listens to  
Music speaks louder than words  
When you sing, people understand.”*

Songwriters: Harold Timothy Payne, Edgar B. Pease, James Scarpiello Michael

In a more recent poem by retired UMC Pastor, Steve Garnass-Holmes, we can get a feeling for how these “seeming tongues of fire” from the scripture, Levertov’s “splinters of fire” and “strains of music heard than lost” might come together for us: **Pentecost**

We were sitting around talking  
about how he loved us,  
when it flared up in us—not a memory,  
but inward fire, the love itself,  
like a mother's love that drives her  
into a burning house to save her children—  
*his* love, this unbidden passion  
for the world, flamed up in us  
and drove us into the streets  
to seek the stranger, to embrace  
the foreigner, and to speak—  
how to convey it?—this love  
for all who'd been told  
they were outsiders,  
in languages not our own:  
locked doors opened,  
fruit placed in their mouths,  
hands laid on their shoulders,  
belonging nested in the crib  
of their hearts. Homecoming.  
That day there were no strangers.  
We were all kin, all learning  
how to listen together for the first time  
to this mystery rising up to greet us  
in each other, all of us losing  
our tongues for the language of God.  
Then we knew that fire Jesus had  
had not been put out:  
it was in us, now, spreading, yes, actually,  
like wildfire.

The unending fire of Jesus’ love is still with us, as close as our own burning hearts. Each of us has a bundle of spiritual passions gifted to us by God. It is these passions that the Holy Spirit ignited on the first Pentecost and which we seek to reignite today in remembrance of that day and wish and hope and pray that we might watch them spread “like wildfire.” Amen.

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