



"THE FIRE THIS TIME" – ACTS 2:1-11

Pentecost Sunday

By: Reverend Melech E.M. Thomas

"God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, but the fire next time."

To believe that enslaved Africans had no theology of their own is to believe that the "mailman" is the one who sent you the mail. From the genesis of the Christian faith, and even prior to it, our ancestors knew the God of the Bible. Long before the European interruption, African people interacted with the God of Scripture. They were familiar with God's character. They read how the God of the Hebrew Bible spoke about the treatment of the poor, the exclusion of the other, and God's justice against oppressors, victimizers, and unjust laws. They read about how Jesus spent His time on Earth working the poor, the widow, the disinherited, and most vulnerable. And they read how that same Jesus was killed by the Roman Empire and given the execution that was reserved for political revolutionaries. African people have never been "strangers" to Christianity.

With that being said, when our ancestors sang "Spirituals", they were not crafted out of the naïve, neophyte expression of a shallow religion. To the contrary, enslaved Africans pulled from their own deep wells of theological understanding to craft and create hymns. Hymns that highlighted a rejection of White Jesus' liturgical, ecclesiastical, and theological endorsement of the institution of slavery. Hymns that rebelled against the existential threat of White Supremacy against Black souls. Hymns that proclaimed God's thirst for justice amongst the barren lands of American slave-ocracy.

They sang songs like:

"Wade in the Water, Wade in the Water, Wade in the Water, because God's gonna trouble the waters!"

"Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel..."

These hymns were not only theological in nature, but also radical in spirit. Scripture and religion for our ancestors were directly linked to their liberation and freedom. They were declarations into the "Not Yet." A rallying cry against the "As Is." A bold acknowledgement that the God of history not only SEES their suffering, but is coming to SAVE them from their suffering.

Therefore, when they sang that "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the Fire Next Time", that is a tacit reminder of the Covenant that God made with Noah back in Genesis. God saw the injustice and the violence that persisted all over the Earth. God was so pissed that God said, "I

regret the day that I made humanity.” The depravity was so bad that the Bible says in Genesis 6:5, “that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.”

God sends a flood to wipe out the world and start all over. And the only ones that were saved were Noah’s family and two of every living creature of the earth who were loaded onto an ark. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. When the rain came to a stop, and they landed on dry ground, God makes a covenant with Moses to never do this again. Listen to what God says in Genesis 9:11, “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

This is true. Nowhere else in Scripture do you see flood waters washing away the evils, unrighteousness, and wickedness of the world. HOWEVER, what you do see is the emergence of another natural phenomenon as a symbolic of God’s judgement on a World: FIRE. In fact, “fire” becomes one of the chief manifestations of God’s presence and revelation in the Hebrew Bible.

When God heard the cries of the oppressed Hebrew people in slavery in Egypt, God appeared to Moses in the Midianite desert as a bush on FIRE. While Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, Exodus 24:17 says, “Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring FIRE on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.” When Jeremiah was being persecuted by the King for his work, he says in Jeremiah 20:9, “If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”

On one hand, FIRE symbolizes God’s presence and revelation. So in the typical readings of this morning’s Pentecost Sunday text in Acts 2, the falling of the Holy Ghost is usually embodied by platitudes about presence of God and rhetoric about the revelation of God filling the sanctuary. LISTEN to what the Apostle Luke had to say about that day, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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.” Wow, what an ornate text! What gorgeous imagery to highlight the moment that the Church was born!

To that end, preaching on Pentecost usually revolves around high emotion, charismatic expression, and praise breaks. Hammond B-3 organs are vibrating, tambourines are beating, hands are clapping, feet are shuffling, goosebumps start rising, and tongues start talking. After chuuuuch, the saints and the ain’ts leave the building saying, “Ooooooh chile, the Presence of the LAWD was in this place. Did you see Sis. So-and-So catch the Spirit? She ran halfway around the church until she ran into the wall! Did you see Bro. Such-and-Such? I ain’t never seen him get THAT happy!” Because on one hand, we only see FIRE as a symbol of God’s presence and revelation.

But when we only see Pentecostal Fire as a symbol of God’s presence and revelation, then we reduce the Holy Spirit into Spectacle. Pentecostal experience becomes simply performative expression, shouting turns shallow, handclaps cloud conviction, and speaking in tongues sounds like “clanging symbols!” Did God only send the fire to give Christians fuzzy feelings and a good time at Church? Or is there something deeper? Is there more to Pentecost than “ShouldaBoughtaHondas” and War Crys? There must be more to Pentecost than the rumblings of an organ, the claps of the

choir on “2 and 4”, or red liturgical cloths on the pulpit and communion altar? And so here they are, in the Upper Room with FIRE resting upon each of their heads, and we must ask ourselves the critical question: “Why?”

Why did God come in the form of fire? Why couldn't God show up in the form of a beautiful dove? Why didn't God become a sweet and subtle flower, whose fragrance would simply dance upon the nostrils of those within its reach? God could have come in the form of anything, but God chose fire. I believe that God did not simply send the Fire down to demonstrate God's Presence and God's Revelation, but I believe that God sent the Fire because God wanted to demonstrate God's Power within Revolution. While some people only see God's presence as a “Wholly Other”, completely and totally separate from human affairs, this text points out to us that the Fire falls to a group of people in a particular context in order to send them out into that context. We even see certain cases in Scripture where God responds to injustice and evil with fire. In Ezekiel 16:49, God made it clear that the Fire that God sent to Sodom and Gomorrah had nothing to do with what happened in anybody's bedroom, but it was because of the injustice there: “Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.” Fire is a theological symbol of God's power in revolution.

But while God uses Fire to demonstrate the POWER of Revolution, the Kingdoms of Darkness have historically attempted to use FIRE to PARALYZE Revolution. In the 1650s, Anthony Johnson was a free African tobacco farmer who owned hundreds of acres of land on Virginia's Eastern Shore. White neighbors were jealous of his wealth BURNED his property to the ground. The European settlers burned down the villages, the crops, and the livestock of the Arowak, the Iroquois, the Cherokee, the Sequoia, the Sioux, and so many other Indigenous tribes. After Reconstruction, the KKK burned crosses on the lawns of Black families in a form of theological terrorism. In 1919, White folk in the North were upset that Black people lived in the same neighborhoods as them and worked the same jobs as them. So they conspired to burn down the homes that the Black people owned. There was so much violence in Black neighborhoods during 1919 that they called it “Red Summer.”

In Tulsa's Greenwood neighborhood, Black folk were so prosperous, they called it Black Wall Street and the American Government dropped BOMBS on it and BURNED it to the ground. All throughout the Jim Crow South, when Africans were hung from trees like “strange fruit”, they BURNED their bodies to further terrorize and traumatize them. In Aug 1945, we dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and BURNED IT to the ground. In May 1985, MOVE was bombed in Philadelphia by the police department, killing innocent men, women, and children. And now 36 years later, those same charred remains are being studied by the descendants and relatives of those who bombed them. And as we gather, \$3.8 billion worth of American weaponry is raining fire on innocent Palestinians, while the Israeli government perverts Judaism to promote Zionist apartheid. FIRE is far too often used by Empire to paralyze revolution.

Yet, we all witnessed last summer the sheer hypocrisy of politicians who condemned the uprisings from the people in cities all over the United States. The same leaders who fund and support the fires that burn down cities in the Middle East, in Africa, and in South America now claim that revolution can only take place where there is no fire. Yet, there would be no American empire without their perversion of ideas behind fire. So in the face of American hypocrisy, there must be a reckoning

with a generation of young people who say, “We’ve TRIED negotiation. We’ve TRIED civil disobedience. We’ve TRIED marches. We’ve TRIED rallies. And all of it seems for naught.” And it seems as if God is speaking to America and remixes the sentiment of that Negro Spiritual to say “there is no more water. And the Fire ain’t coming NEXT time, but it’s THE FIRE THIS TIME.”

What does the Fire THIS time mean in a world where regardless of political party, the poor are left aside? What does the Fire THIS time mean in a country where the bodies of Black women are traded like currency and discarded as trash? What does the Fire THIS time mean for a church which has contracted prophetic laryngitis? I believe that the answer can be found in three simple points.

1) To Cause a Sitting Church to Stand Up

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he told them to go back to JERUSALEM. Not to stay in the Upper Room. In Acts 1:14, they said they were supposed to be devoting their time to prayer. But in the time in between, the only time we see them praying is when they are holding the election to fill Judas’ place as a disciple. In other words, they only prayed while handling “church business.” If I could pause here parenthetically, how often do we neglect the power and the prioritization of prayerful living because we are distracted by the need to complete “church business” that Jesus never asked us to complete? This is where the disciples find themselves. They are focused on completing “church business” because they want things to appear to be what they’ve always been. So they cease to pray so that they can keep things “normal.”

Considering what comes next in the text, that makes complete sense. The next part of the text says that when the Holy Ghost fire fell, they were sitting. They were comfortable. They were resting. They were chilling. Far too often have we seen a “sitting” church. The Church has been sitting on its laurels, while REFUSING to take the Lead. Sitting in the sanctuary, while remaining silent in the STREETS. Sitting on its history, while doing nothing about the future. God is not concerned about the condition of your pews, but God wants to know the conviction of your people! Listen to what God says through the prophet Amos: *“I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, For I will not bear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream.”* (Amos 5:21-24)

God sends the fire to a sitting church so that those who sit may now STAND UP. Because when the Church STANDS UP, communities change. When the Church stands up, neighborhoods change. When the Church stands up, government officials have to change their tunes. When the Church STANDS UP, entire economies shift. When the Church of Jesus Christ STANDS UP, crooked places are made straight and rough places are made plain! It is time for the Church to STAND UP!

2) To Call Separated Communities to Assemble

Often, when this text is preached, it is preached as if the crowd was already outside of the disciples’ door. However, when you look at the text, it clearly states that the crowd assembled only after the

Spirit fell on the disciples. Why is this, you ask? Allow me to paint the contextual picture here. All of the nationalities present were either at odds with the Roman Empire, or occupied by the Roman Empire. They were from different countries and different realities, while speaking different languages. So when they heard the disciples engaging in xenolalia, they said, “Wait, no one should be speaking my language!” This implies to us two contextual realities here: a) they were forced to speak Koine Greek, and b) they were required to live only around those who spoke the language they spoke. Therefore, when the Holy Spirit fell, segregation fell with it. They were united by the Holy Spirit, made evidentiary by the speaking of specifically foreign tongues.

The fire of the Holy Spirit, in the power of revolution, is a barrier-breaking power. It is a power that unites the causes and the cries of the oppressed wherever and whenever we find it. This is why the Black Church must not be silent about oppression around the globe, even when it does not directly affect us. If we are filled with the Holy Ghost, we now must speak a tongue that relates to the sufferings of Palestinian mothers and fathers who must bury their children because of state-sponsored ethnic cleansing. We must speak to the hearts and souls of those who find themselves confined to ghettos on the West Bank because Western-backed governments steal and plunder their land. We have an obligation to channel the fire of the Holy Ghost to tear down the barriers that separate the oppressed persons all around this world. When the fire falls, separation falls with it and ALL those to whom God aligns God-self shall experience it. Then the word of YHWH to the prophet Joel will come true: *“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon ALL flesh!”*

ALL flesh shall experience the outpouring of the Holy Ghost. Black flesh, brown flesh, female flesh, non-binary flesh, trans flesh, poor flesh, unemployed flesh, Palestinian flesh, ALL flesh must experience the liberating, life-giving, life-changing, world-transforming power of the Holy Ghost!

3) To Consecrate the Saints to Challenge Systems

Finally, we must recognize that the Fire did not fall on the pulpit. It did not fall in a closet full of robes. The fire did not fall on the floor. But the text says that the Fire rested upon the heads of all those in the Upper Room. Why did the fire fall on their heads? As an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, all I can think of is the laying on of hands during the ordination and consecration of our clergy and Bishops. We dedicate and consecrate people to the ministry through the laying on of hands on the HEADS of those ordinands. Therefore, I assert that the fire fell on their heads as a means of consecrating the saints to go out and challenge the systems. Listen to the words of the prophet Malachi as he speaks to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: *“And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness. Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years. And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.”*

Your consecration is not for a better shout. Your consecration is not for a bigger church. Your consecration is not for bigger budgets. Your consecration is for your sending forth into a world that

needs to hear from God. You are being consecrated to change and to challenge systems of injustice, oppression, hegemony, and misogyny. You are being consecrated by the Fire so that we are pure in heart, integral in intentionality, ethical in execution, and forged in a godly determination to bring to pass the Kin-dom of our Savior and Liberator, Jesus Christ. Therefore, I close with the word of that great hymn of the church:

*Consecrate me now to Thy service, Lord,
By the pow'r of grace divine;
Let my soul look up with a steadfast hope,
And my will be lost in Thine.*

May the Fire of the Holy Ghost fall on the Church until everything around it becomes consumed.

Amen and Aśe.

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