

Rev. Sarah Carver

Pentecost 2026

There is a little bird that summers in very specific parts of Northern Michigan, Wisconsin and Ontario. It is the Kirkland's Warbler and this bird seems to have the most ridiculously fastidious, I mean, straight-ticket-to-extinction habitat requirements in order to nest and raise chicks. You see, the Warbler prefers 5-15 year old Jack Pine trees. They have to be a certain size for the bird to like them. If they are too big or too small, the bird moves on. In Michigan, the habitat is so specific that these birds only live in a very small area, maybe 100 miles by 60 miles. It's barely a spot on the map. And Jack Pine trees can live a couple of hundred years. With real estate needs like this, what's a bird going to do? What could possibly support such a picky species? The answer, of course, is fire. It is fire that burns the Jack Pine trees, that opens their cones and allows the next generation of trees to seed. It is fire that clears the ground of debris and undergrowth, letting the newly released seeds to fall on freshly nourished soil that can now receive all the sunlight needed for that seed to grow. It is fire that clears the way for new seedlings to burst forth to become the young trees that the Warbler requires to nest. In fact, fire is a force for renewal of entire forest ecosystems: it cleans up what is dead, replenishes the soil with nutrients, opens the ground to the sun.

And yet we have feared fire. And sought to control it so that nothing burns. Only you can prevent forest fires is a familiar phrase from the childhood of many of us. We were raised to believe that wild fire was a great evil that destroyed all that was good and green. And so we suppressed the fire, stomped it out whenever we saw smoke and let the forests become over grown, littered with debris and the soil drained of sustenance. And now, when the fire comes, it comes as an

unstoppable beast that is truly destructive, fed by the over abundance of fuel, a thousand fires that should have taken place over many years, now combined into one. We have seen whole towns in the West destroyed by such fire. The thinking is changing in forest land management and it seems a little more fire might be tolerated going forward—to prevent these massive firestorms from occurring. The lesson is that we ought to remember how we need fire, and how we should welcome it, because it is coming whether we say so or not.

The fire is indeed coming and has already come to us in the person of the Holy Spirit which we celebrate on this day of Pentecost. And she comes to us as breath, as a great wind, as fire—she comes to those gathered in that upper room to anoint them with flame and to fill their mouths with the words they need to go out and tell the whole world about Jesus. She fills their own spirits with the very Spirit of God. That room is full of God moving within and without the faithful; unstoppable, and undefinable and those who are caught up in it are finding themselves in the very I Am that is God: their breath, their bodies, and indeed their very souls are no longer theirs alone but are now a part of the essence of all that is Holy and good. In our nice church language we talk about receiving the Holy Spirit. I always tend to think of people holding out their hands to kind of catch her. But in that upper room, it seems more apt to say that the Holy Spirit has grabbed them and encircled them in all that life and love, and newness that Jesus had promised to send. These faithful are utterly swallowed up in this moment—in the moment the church was born, when her members were joined to one another by the Holy Spirit and made able to understand one another, indeed to connect with one another, to be one no longer separated by language, or country. And from that moment we are able to stand here today, we who are a people born of fire. The roaring, unstoppable, unpredictable fire of God.

And yet, we Christians struggle with the Holy Spirit and we tend to be unsettled by her. We like to try and put her in the very orderly and familiar box that is church and our church traditions and we like to keep her manageable and safe. We tend to relegate her flame to candles, we cool her passion with committee meetings. We shy away from her disruption. Because it is the Holy Spirit that moves as the will of God, who takes us out of our safe and predictable spaces and pulls us into the unknown and the very new. We may want to go straight ahead in our walk of faith and the Spirit comes and pushes us off the path entirely and onto uncharted territory

And yet disruption will find us no matter where we go. There was no avoiding the disruption that marked the days of the pandemic. No dodging the uncertainty of a more and more unpredictable world. No way to avoid loss and fear as chaos and distrust make their way into our everyday. Even in our very local context here of St. Peter's has seen a lot of change. Many feel that so much has been upended. Everything is changing. And yet, we still remain. We still remain the church. We still have before us the work of sharing the gospel, and seeing to those who are not ok. Faith remains, God remains, and we are left to adapt and move forward. Remember how, as the pandemic was ending, and we were beginning to find our way back into the lives we knew before the pandemic, there was a real temptation to go back to "normal"—to go back to the way things were however that looked in our minds. But we found that returning to the same world wasn't possible. There was no going back. And while we may have mourned this and mourn it still, the unknown, the charting of a new way is an opportunity to try some new things, to BE new, to see what has been burned away that allows for new things to grow.

As I've said so many times, ours is a God of beginnings, of new life. This year's Pentecost sees us in just that place, where we are beginning again. And the

Holy Spirit is in the midst of all that—moving and creating. Do we trust her enough to join her? I spoke at length about desert fathers and mothers during Lent, and so let me share as story from that tradition as we come to the beginning of ordinary, that is, ordered time in our church calendar where things are quiet, and maybe even a little sleepy: Abba Lot came to Abba Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and, according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not become fire?

Why not become fire? Why not take the chance and join the Spirit in the creative chaos that catches us up in life and love, who purifies us and brings us back to who we are—the beloved children of God who calls us to burn with that same love for the world, for those who know no such warmth. Why not welcome a little fire into our midst? For we need the Spirit to sustain us, we need her to be the Church. No matter our abilities to manage budgets, build community, care for the vulnerable, at the end of the day, we are just as reliant on the Spirit's fire as that tiny little warbler is on the fire that burns the trees. We are who we are, we live and walk in faith because the Spirit of God, the Advocate, has come to us and caught us up in herself and transformed us into the Body of Christ.

So let us welcome fire, let us welcome the unbridled Spirit to make us anew, the Spirit who remained faithful to us through out this past year, and let us welcome her fire, passion, and her creativity. And let us not fear the fire, nor try to stifle it because in the end we will only snuff out ourselves. For in the words of an ancient Mozarabic prayer:

Hear us, O never-failing Light,

Lord our God, our only Light, the Fountain of Light,

the Light of your angels, thrones, dominions,  
principalities, powers, and of all the beings of this world;  
you have created the light of your saints,  
the bright cloud of witnesses around us.  
May our souls be your lamps, kindled and illumined by you.  
May they shine and burn with your truth,  
and never go out in darkness and ashes.  
May we be your dwelling, shining from you, shining in you;  
may we shine and our light never fail;  
may we worship you always.  
May we be kindled brightly and never extinguished.  
Being filled with Christ's splendor,  
may we shine within, so that the gloom of sin is cleared away,  
and the light of everlasting life abides within us.<sup>1</sup> Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Enriching Our Worship 3. Pg 78.