



I haven't always been as gung ho about the whole bonfire thing as many of my friends have over the years, but nevertheless the flames tended to appear after the sun vanished from the vista: from down on the farm to church camp to other gatherings along the way. I'm sure my excitement level wasn't quite the same because I knew I wasn't quite as competent in building and maintaining one, myself. I didn't go through Boy Scouts growing up; 4-H was the closest extra-curricular activity, and that was more so about

maintaining girths of cows and pigs than campfire circles. But, again, I was around my fair share of Boy Scouts and those who learned a more professional method than my novice crumbled-up newspapers beneath a tipi formation of random sticks. It almost seemed to be an exact science for them to rival orthopedic surgery or molecular genetics: as if placing certain pieces of wood at specific angles would dramatically increase the height of flames and fully maximize their duration. However, it wasn't just that.

As much as I am not insistent on getting a good fire going at the end of a family gathering or during a weekend with friends, I have noticed that a bonfire not only brings about decent-sized bursts of light, it usually produces a fair amount of conversation around the display. There's something about it that just makes people feel comfortable, not just physically in the sense of warmth amidst the cool night summer breezes (when the actual weather doesn't seem to be hotter than the very flames themselves), but emotionally as well. It's as if the random shades of yellow and orange, perhaps even the crackling symphony of sparks, calms the observer from whatever stress was happening during the sunlight hours leading up to that soothing moment. They start to dramatically unwind, process out-loud those happenings that they haven't had the chance to before, delve into philosophical questions about the meaning of life, and who knows what else may come about during those throw-caution-to-the-flame moments (granted, certain "inspiring" beverages have impacted such talks over our collective history; even Peter has to confront that in the Pentecost story, but minor detail).

Yes, fire imagery gets brought to the forefront on this Pentecost Sunday, when "divided tongues, as of fire" (Acts 2:3) set the stage for the disciples to unleash a new whirlwind of ministry and hope on Jerusalem and beyond...well, *well* beyond. Except, with this form of spark, they didn't need to pull off an exact science of setting it up. It just...happened. And yes, it not only lead to conversations, even in different languages, but it would eventually lead to unwinding with other children of God over the obsession of having to prove themselves right to God in the grand horrifying scheme of sin and death, processing where that God could be in the happenings of their life, diving into the questions over the meaning of it all, and plenty of other fears and worries they may not have dared confront before. That Holy-Spirit-induced flame wasn't just about showing off the disciples' newly found Rosetta-Stone-equivalent of language proficiency, but for such a light to instill a sense of warmth and comfort and calm; and not just for the disciples, but for those around them who desperately needed that spiritual outlet.

From our Lutheran perspective, we would insist that we play no role in building that flame within us, just like the disciples did no such thing long ago. God sets it ablaze. And yet, we have our differing opinions on how to maintain that fire, as if it needs to be an exact science on placing certain Confirmation rites and Bible studies and worships at consistent rates in order to ensure the flame doesn't go out. Let's be honest, plenty of us children of God worry about that

Holy-Spirit-induced fire fading out the longer we don't make the holy trek inside our cherished sanctuary walls and allow the organ to add the precious kindling spark of music, as well as the laughter and smiles from other Holy-Spirit-blazes-of-enthusiasm sisters and brothers.

Except, this God doesn't operate that way. The Holy Spirit does not set a timer on when the fire will dissipate unless we place certain pieces of faith moments at a precise timing. Once it starts, it can never...*ever* be extinguished. That is part of the Gospel, the Greatest News that still applies in pandemic times. Granted, the Holy Spirit within us craves for continued ministry to be done, as it was brought to life on that Pentecost Sunday for such a momentous purpose. Nevertheless, that Holy Spirit will take the ministry inside sanctuaries and community meals inside fellowship halls, as well as through computer screens or contactless food delivery or standing at opposite sidewalks. After all, the blaze within us is more than large enough to create that warmth, that comfort, that precious calm not just within us, or even six feet away, but for it to reach all over the world. So, no worries: the Holy Spirit is still burning within us as much now as it ever has been, and ever will be for all eternity. And for that Greatest News, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!