

Sermon for Sunday, January 20, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"HOLY SMOKE OF A CHURCH ON FIRE"
Acts 3:1-10

Text: "And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God." Acts 3:8

Peter and John were going to the temple. It was the hour of prayer. And there at the gate of the temple sat the beggar. Over in chapter four of Acts we are told that this man was over forty years old. How many years had he been sitting there! Probably everyone familiar with the temple always pictured that particular gate to the temple with him sitting by it. Over the years he had become such a fixture he was just a part of the scene. So when Peter and John were passing by he held up his alms bowl. They both stopped and Peter said to him, "Look at us." The beggar's eyes must have lit up with anticipation and the Bible says he gave his full attention to them, expecting to receive something. But then Peter speaks, "I have no silver and gold." How that beggar's face must have fallen! He had been lame from birth and he was totally dependent upon the charity of those who passed by. His need was very real and very pressing and now these two men were going to fail him. Like most preachers, they were broke, "I have no silver and gold." That reminds me of the story of the little country church that needed a pastor and the only one they could afford would be a graduating senior from the seminary so they sent a delegation to the seminary and they talked with the president. The president said to them, "What you really need for your church is a young man who is poor and humble." And they said, "Mr. President, you give us a man who is humble and we will keep him poor." But Peter was not through. He speaks again. "I don't have any silver and gold but I'm going to give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." And with that, Peter took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet. As he did, the Bible says his bones were made strong. He began walking and leaping and praising God. I think in my own mind sometimes that that beggar is a symbol of our world today. Our world is a crippled and broken world in so many ways and we live right now in the threat of World War. Oh, how that world needs Jesus to lift it up for him and heal it.

Now, when that happened, a lot of things began to occur in a hurry! First, a crowd began to gather around because of all the excitement. Second, when the crowd gathered, Peter began to tell them about Jesus. Third, the priests at the temple had them arrested. The next day they were ordered to stop their street preaching or else. Fourth, in spite of this, the Bible tells us that many who heard the word believed and the number of men came to about five thousand. And finally, in retrospect, the beggar who asked some turned on Christians for help got a lot more than he every dared to ask or dream.

I would like to describe this picture of the early church as the church on fire. Those early Christians were on fire for Jesus. Back when I was in seminary one of my professors used to say, "Boys, if you are on fire for Jesus, the whole world will come to see you burn." That's what happened! With the church on fire, a crowd immediately turned up. One of the problems with many churches today is that the church isn't on fire for Jesus. A lot of people today are buying the "uncola" drink, but did you ever hear of people showing up for an un-fire? That's what is happening today. People are not showing up in droves! That's because the church isn't on fire for Jesus. Some of us preachers can get excited about human rights in Africa or Rhodesia, we can get excited about liberation theology down in the Third World which is a perversion of Christianity into Communistic Marxist Form. Or we can get excited about international economic order--whatever in the world that is--but we can't get excited about Jesus.

There is a story about one of the early popes of Rome. It seems he was showing a visitor around the Vatican, displaying for him the great pieces of art, the fine pieces of silver and gold, and all of the wealth that had flowed into the Holy City. Laughingly the pope said, "I'm afraid that we can no longer say with Peter and John, 'silver and gold have I none.'" "Yes", replied the visitor, "and neither can you say 'rise up and walk.'" Now, the point is this, when the church gets its eyes off Jesus--when the focus of its life is anything except our Lord, the fire goes out and the power is turned off. Yes, when the church is on fire for Jesus, people are attracted. They sense that here is something they are searching for. Here is something that will meet the deepest needs of their lives.

So, the first comment I want to make is that the church ought to be on fire for Jesus. I want to make a second comment by reversing an old cliché. That reversed cliché is this: where there is fire there is smoke. Or, as someone has humorously put it, "Church on fire--holy smoke." What I mean by that is this: when you have got a church on fire for Jesus, it is going to produce some Holy Smoke. The problem with smoke is, it gets in somebody's eyes or it gets down somebody's windpipe and gags them; or somebody begins to worry about their Sunday suit smelling like Holy Smoke. So, the next thing you know, somebody is trying to put out the fire so there won't be any smoke! As a matter of fact, every minister I've talked to who had a church on fire also had some members who were self-commissioned firemen trying to put out the fire because of the smoke.

All of this is to say that when a church is on fire for Jesus, when things are really happening, there are going to be some smoke problems. That's exactly what happened to Peter and John. Right away smoke got in the eyes of the priests at the temple and they had them thrown in jail. The Bible tells us they tried to put out the fire and commanded them not to teach or preach in the name of Jesus.

You know, there are some people who say that a church ought not to have any dissension or disagreement. They say a church ought to always be sweetness and light, peace and harmony. But I want to tell you a secret. The only church where there isn't some smoke getting in somebody's eye from time to time is a church where the fire has gone out! You see, God didn't give us an ideal church or a perfect fellowship. If you ever find one like that, don't join it! You'll spoil it. As a matter of fact, by the time we get to chapter five of Acts, one of the leading Elders has lied to the preacher and died of a heart attack as a consequence. By chapter six, they have a fight over family night church supper.

Yes, if a church is on fire, there will be some holy smoke in somebody's eye or down somebody's windpipe. The reason is simple. Even a church on fire for Jesus is still made up of men who are sinners. We are still a fellowship where there is little faith, much weakness, and great difficulties. We are still a fellowship where there are inadequate people, stingy givers, reluctant workers, petty people. We are a fellowship of people who still sin, gossip, lie, cheat, steal, and commit adultery. As somebody has said, the church is sort of like Noah's Ark. You couldn't stand the smell inside if it wasn't for the water outside!

So a church on fire has some holy smoke. So if anybody has any smoke in his eye this morning, he ought to rejoice. It means that there is a Jesus-fire burning! Now I want to talk this morning about how to set a church on fire. A church on fire is a church where people have had a first-hand encounter with Jesus and have been filled with his Holy Spirit. Peter and John had met the living Lord. They had a personal encounter with the living Jesus and at Pentecost they had been filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told them they would receive power from on high and when the Holy Spirit came, they got their extension cord plugged in. They were turned on for Jesus. The first requirement for a church on fire is for men and women to know Jesus by personal experience and to be filled with His Spirit.

Have you had that happen to you? And let me say this about our experiences with Jesus: every Christian ought to have a fresh new testimony about Jesus. It isn't enough to have had an experience once upon a time. Instead you need to have a fresh, new experience every day. When you get up to give your testimony you can say, "Here is how I came to know the Lord, but let me tell you what's going on right now as I keep on knowing Jesus." One of my favorite stories that I'm sure many of you have heard me tell before is about the man who had an experience with the Lord. Every chance he got after this happened to him, he shared what he called his "blessed experience." But, as the months went by, he decided he had better write the experience down so he wouldn't forget it. Finally, he put it away in an upstairs dresser drawer. Years went by. Then one night a visitor came and they got to talking about religion. Suddenly he remembered his blessed experience. "Wife," he said, "Go up stairs and get me my blessed experience out of the dresser drawer." Soon she was back but her face was sad and worried. "Dear," she said, "I don't know how to tell you, but the mice have eaten your blessed experience!" Well, that happens to us. The mice of time and worry and trouble eat up our blessed experiences. We need to have fresh, new encounters with Jesus. We need a new testimony every day of our walk with the Lord.

So, a church on fire is one where people have a first-hand encounter with Jesus and are filled with his Holy Spirit. Dr. Hendry, a professor at Princeton Seminary, rightly observes the Apostles' Creed misses the point when it states, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." The real question is not whether you believe, but have you received the Holy Spirit. Have you been filled with the Spirit--has your extension cord been plugged into the power of God.

The second characteristic of a church on fire is that it has got its priorities straight. The first business of the church is to share Jesus by telling other people about him. That day at the temple, when the crowd gathered over the excitement of the healed beggar, the first thing Peter and John did was to tell them about Jesus. Then, after spending the night in jail and being commanded not to preach in the name of Jesus, the first they did was to say, "whether we listen to God or to you, you be the judge, but as for us, we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." They had their priorities straight. One of the most serious problems I see in our denomination and in all of Christendom is that we don't have our priorities straight. The first business of the church is to tell about Jesus. Jesus himself said, "And I, if I be lifted up, shall draw all men unto me." The church that truly holds up Jesus will draw a crowd because it is a church on fire.

The third characteristic of the church on fire is that it has evidence of its love for Jesus, for the people for whom Jesus died. I have never known a church on fire for Jesus but that it was also involved in what we call today social action. But notice the order of priorities! Some people try to put social action first. But social action is not the Gospel. Jesus is the gospel--the good news. Social action is the fruit of the gospel. And a church on fire for Jesus is going to have that kind of fruit where it is reaching out in love and compassion to touch the lives of others for him.

Let me share with you an experience I had a number of years ago. I may have told you this before--I was doing some post-graduate work in counseling at the San Francisco Seminary in California. One evening a fellow student who lived in the area took me down into the night club district. Well, I felt like the little old lady who told her preacher one Sunday morning after a particularly firey sermon, "Pastor, we didn't know what sin was until you came here." All the night clubs were "topless" and prostitutes walked the streets. The girls in the nightclubs danced, but their smiles were painted on and their eyes were dull and disillusioned. The musicians played bright, loud music, but they looked like robots with no joy or expression. The bar tenders looked cynical and bored. The prostitutes put on a

happy face to proposition a prospect, but when he turned away the mask of gaiety fell off and she was just another tired, hopeless person whose feet probably hurt and who hoped she could pay her rent tomorrow. I watched the people in those crowded bars and nightclubs--people who drank too much, laughed too loud, tried too hard to have a good time. They looked like people who down deep wished they had some place to go and somebody to go to.

When we got back to the seminary which is actually across the bay from San Francisco we stood there on top of the hill looking back across the bay at the lights. Those people down there didn't know the seminary was there and couldn't care less. Worse still, I wasn't sure the seminary knew those people were down there and I didn't know if it cared either. Here was the church on the hill and down there was the world of sinful men--men Jesus came to die for. That night I wondered--if Jesus were here, where would I find him? Would he be on seminary hill or would he be across the bay?

Well, I know where I would have found him--and you know, too. A church on fire is made up of people who know Jesus first-hand and have been filled with his Holy Spirit; a church on fire is made up of people who have their priorities straight and are sharing Jesus with others; and a church on fire is a church that is bearing the fruit of the gospel--that is reaching out to the kind of people who live across the bay.

The fourth thing I want to say is this; has your fire gone out? What is your relationship to Jesus Christ? Have you had a fresh encounter with him? You see, to change this church we have got to start with you and with me. Most of us have either seen on television or read or heard about Graham Kerr, the galloping gourmet. He and his wife Treena came to America and professionally were a tremendously successful team. Soon they had over a million dollars in the bank. However, a tragic highway accident ended their careers when they were seriously injured. The consequences of the accident only intensified the strain of a marriage that was already in deep trouble. Treena sank into deep depression and despair; she began to take all kinds of pills, "uppers", "downers", pain-killers, sleeping pills--but nothing worked.

Treena tells what happened this way: We had a maid working for us at that time. Her name was Ruthie and she shimmered with joy every day. I turned to her one day and said, 'I just don't know what to do, Ruthie.' She simply said, 'Why don't you give your problems to God?' to which I brusquely replied, 'Okay, God. You take them. I can't handle them anymore.' God took them! Seven days later I went to Ruthie's small church in Bethlehem, Maryland. As the singing, handclapping congregation prayed for their 'new sister' I fell to my knees, crying tears that flowed like waterfalls. 'I'm sorry, Jesus. I'm sorry Jesus,' I repeated again and again."

Treena goes on to tell how she was baptized and was asked to tarry for the Holy Spirit. She writes, "I didn't know who the Holy Spirit was, let alone what tarry meant. 'What do I do?' I asked. Ruthie told me to say, 'Thank you Jesus.' So I did--over and over. The church was hot and I felt ridiculous. Really, I thought, you are a sophisticated woman of forty going right out of your mind! Then a bright light fell on my face and I thought, 'now they've turned up the church lights to make me think that I've got it--whatever "it" is!' I opened my eyes and there I saw a Man. He was dressed all in white and He had the most wonderful smile I have ever seen. It held all the love in all the world. He stretched His hand toward me and He touched my heart. He said, 'You have it.' and I laughed! tears of joy as I said, 'I know...I know...I know.'" Do you know?