

The promise of Pentecost is baptism.

The one coming after me, John the Baptist promised, will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

This Pentecostal promise speaks not of some infantile christening, the dribbling of water across the crown, water wiped away with delicate embroidered cloths. Nor does this promise speak of the lighting of a tiny candle with safe flame, or the rubbing of an oily cross on the forehead.

Rather, this Pentecostal promise threatens full immersion.

Full immersion, as in inundation, the element of water encases you in some tomb. You could drown, or perhaps burn, for the Holy Spirit entombs you in explosion, and conflagration. Flames of God's power lap inexhaustibly skyward, with your soul as fuel. Baptism by fire is soulful, like the first baptism, As I went down in the river to pray ...

The line of pilgrims snaking upward from the shore, grasses blowing at heels. Person after person stepping tentatively into the water, with promise as soap to clean the soul. Hope to change: to become somebody better, regeneration by element of water.

But water is dangerous, fire is dangerous, baptism is dangerous, and the Holy Spirit is dangerous. An unshucked atom, but John the wild-Baptist promised a Pentecostal baptism.

The One coming after me will baptize you with Spirit and Fire, not water on the head, drip by dribble, but fire.

In February last year, NASA launched the Space Shuttle Endeavour. The nighttime launch STS-130 was scheduled for 4:39am. My kids and I were invited by one of the astronauts to watch the launch.

Now, They say a space shuttle launch is dangerous. Not just to the astronauts, but to spectators. Liquid hydrogen, 423 degrees below zero, is combined with liquid oxygen to inaugurate an explosive thrust of 37 million horsepower.

The explosion consumes so much fuel that, were it water in a swimming pool, the pool would drain in 25 seconds.

The raw explosive sound alone would kill you if you stood within a hundred yards. The closest non-NASA spectators must watch from six miles away, across a river.

On Feb. 7, Florida was cold: forty-two degrees, and the sky was crystal. The Big Dipper and the North Star were directly above the launchpad. The kids and I waited for hours with hundreds of other spectators along the shore of the Banana River, huddling in blankets.

About an hour before the launch, a bank of low-ceiling clouds rolled-in, and threatened the launch. NASA needs to see a shuttle visually to 5,000 feet. Undaunted, NASA continued the countdown.

The clouds were tenacious, and at T-minus nine minutes, NASA scrubbed the launch and rescheduled it for the same time the next night. We were discouraged and couldn't decide whether to return. The clouds hung low all that day - what were the chances staying awake another night would work?

We thought about Disney World, but decided no – we'd come this far for this reason, so ...

Again, we huddled all night, clouds hanging low. Then about thirty minutes before launch, the cloud bank slid off to the side, a few stars appeared, and this time, the countdown passed T-minus Nine Minutes. Finally, into seconds, and then, 10-9-8-7-6 ...

At four, the liquid hydrogen explosively combined with the liquid oxygen, and we watched the sky light instantly, and the shuttle like an old man from a chair lifted rose slowly to the sky.

But it was no old man, it was, as someone remarked, instant sunrise, for the fireball lit the sky and clouds and horizon.

The remaining clouds turned orange; the water glistened, and the fish in the Banana River, the frogs at water's edge, alligators and egrets, all paused to catch incredulous breath at the extraordinary sight and finally, the roar.

The single most exquisite element of launch is the rumbling roar speeding low across water, far slower than the speed of light. At five seconds per mile, the sound reached us at thirty seconds after liftoff, bathing us in extraordinary spirit.

Jesus' followers heard sound first, before they saw the flame, the sound of spirit traveled faster than light. Until now, they had been incarnational believers only. Jesus was alive, physically, and they had thrust their fingers into his hands and their fists into his pierced side. But they had not yet experienced spirit: the internal radiance of Moses and the indefatigable power of Elijah.

The essence of God that animates. They were still dead, but today, they would come alive.

Today, the prepossessing roar of Spirit as at creation, the same breath of God, expressed across the deep – like oxygen fanning flame, the sound itself baptized these neophyte Christians by Holy Spirit and translation! Translated life, for once they were lost, but now they were found, once they were dead bones, but now sinew and muscle and blood and fire kindled deep inside.

Perhaps you received the Holy Spirit in some civilized ceremony, with droplets of water falling onto your head, and the polite sign of the cross pressed into your forehead.

On that day, the church ladies smiled. They nodded to one another, and observed, How sweet –

But neither they, nor you, realized the power transmitted by liquid drops of hydrogen and oxygen onto your head.

An unshucked atom. The very Spirit of God in you is still unshucked. You are Jesus on this earth – his heir – and you don't even know it.

Perhaps the Pentecostals understand something of God we don't get: they celebrate the Holy Spirit in a ritual of fiery baptism, dancing and shouting and speaking in tongues. They engage the atomic power of God's Spirit, while we Episcopalians act like the Father has invited us to afternoon tea and crumpets.

In the process, could it be that we deny the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit of God is this: the anime, the essence of spirit in body – the animating power of God in you.

Have you been with someone when they die? The person changes instantly. Their spirit leaves, their anime, their animating force, and their body is reduced to mere cells and molecules.

But until that moment of death – even with someone who is severely sick – there is an essence still within – that animating force that is life itself –

And for us, as Christians, there is a life force that animates you, God's very spirit gives life to your mortal cells and molecules, igniting you with fire.

Alive with God in Christ.

In the old story of two abbots. The younger - Lot – inquired of the older and wiser, Joseph: Father, it seems I can only do so much to help my brothers – pray a little, read Scripture a little, and meditate. I help them live in peace and, to the best of my abilities, purify my thoughts.

What else can I do?

The older abbot slowly stood, stretched both his hands to heaven, splaying his fingers, and said, If you will, you can become all flame.

God as Spirit has given life to your mortal bodies by breath and by fire. You are the fire of God. The explosion of power.

And I'm wondering, what extraordinary life will you lead, what exquisite sound will come from your soul?