

Something happened that day.

As Bishop Elaine says: "You just don't make this stuff up."

We can't know for sure what happened that day.

We do know something powerful happened.

A metaphor came to mind that I thought I would follow -  
at least to an extent.

And that is a phenomenon of weather called St. Elmo's fire.

I'll say a little about it and who wrote about it in ancient times.

Then I will return to our story for today  
with a few implications from St. Elmo's fire.

It may have been something that was experienced that day  
from a scientific perspective - if they were outside – or up on a roof.

But – the text does not say where they were -  
other than they were gathered.

At the least – it is a metaphor.

What is a metaphor?

A metaphor is an analogy – one thing that helps explain another.

Let's just use this idea of metaphor –  
as a way to think about what happened.

Let's use it as a clue to what could be important to us here today.



What is St. Elmo's fire

other than a movie that came out several years ago?

St. Elmo's fire is a phenomenon with weather and the atmosphere.

It is actually when air breaks down  
because the atmosphere is very highly charged with electricity.

We all know how thunderstorms  
create an electrically charged atmosphere.  
The electrical charge between the clouds and the ground is different.  
This is why lightning happens –  
which is an electrical charge shooting to the ground.

But sometimes the air between the clouds and the ground  
actually breaks apart.

The electrons and protons in the air molecule  
spin farther and farther apart and break the molecule.

Scientists call this ionization.

And - ionized air emits a glow.

St. Elmo's fire – is basically electrons that are glowing.  
And when they glow or sparkle - they make a kind of hissing sound.  
Aircraft pilots have heard the sound on their radios as a musical scale.  
St. Elmo's fire usually shows up at the end of pointed objects  
like the mast of a ship – or the top of a steepled building.

You might see it on an aircraft by a glow on the wing tips –  
or the tail – or propeller blades.

Even on the ground during a thunderstorm  
St. Elmo's fire has been seen on leaves - blades of grass -  
and the horns of cattle.

It is usually of a blue or bluish-white color and it doesn't last long.  
It looks like a flame – but it is heatless and non-consuming.  
(There is a subject for another time.)

Sailors on the Mediterranean Sea first described it.

And - they didn't tell of abandoning ship  
when they saw what looked like flames  
at the tips of the sails.

Pliny the Elder - a Roman citizen – born in 23 A.D. -  
a military commander and naturalist - wrote about the blue flames  
appearing out of nowhere during thunderstorms.  
They knew that they weren't looking at actual fire.  
They seemed to take comfort in this sudden glow atop the masts.

Magellan and Columbus experienced it.  
Shakespeare and Melville wrote about it.

To experience St. Elmo's fire was a good omen -  
because it usually occurred  
when thunderstorms were dissipating -  
when the most violent surface winds were calming down.  
You might say it was an answer to the sailor's prayers.  
They would say that the guiding hand of St. Elmo was present.

The sailors attributed this glow to St. Elmo.

But who was St. Elmo?

I thought Elmo was a Sesame Street character or  
the name of the 1985 television series.

As it turns out - St. Elmo is an incorrect pronunciation  
of St. Erasmus or St. Ermo in Italian -  
the patron saint of Mediterranean sailors.

His fire was a sign of encouragement.

Because – remember the fire-like appearance and hissing sound

happen toward the end of a thunderstorm -  
almost as if to say – the worst is over -  
as if God was saying – all will be well.  
So – there is a little about St. Elmo's fire.



Now - let's return to Jerusalem and the crowds gathered for Pentecost –  
some bewildered disciples among them.

Let's consider if there was some extraordinary meaning -  
or even a familiar image -

in seeing something like flames – tongues of fire -  
and hearing a sound – that manifested the presence of the Holy  
in somewhat the same way as people had experienced  
the presence of the Holy on the sea or in the fields.

They would not have called it St. Elmo's fire.  
Erasmus – who became the Saint who protected those at sea  
would not arrive until the fourth century.  
And Pliny would have just been about 8 years old.

But they knew that something had the glow of a fire -  
but did not burn or consume as would a fire.

They knew a sound –  
and you did not have to speak the same language to understand it.

Perhaps it was "tongues" of fire to them –  
the very presence of God – the very presence of something  
that brought it all together –  
in a way that helped them want to go out and tell the story.



And on that day in Jerusalem – something was reconnecting people  
who seemed so far apart and so different.  
Perhaps that is like the luminous light of St. Elmo's fire.  
Perhaps it is the light we want to bless and reconnect  
the scattered elements of our lives.

Luke is writing about transformation here.  
He is trying to tell us that something life changing  
was going on that day.  
It was an important day.



The Christian story and the Pentecost story is about how ancient people  
experienced an explosion of meaning and purpose in their lives -  
despite the very oppressive environments in which they lived.

Perhaps Luke and other writers knew it could guide us too -  
and that is why they wrote it for us to read today.

I think they tapped into a universal experience  
of the presence and energy of the very thing we call God.  
The very thing we call God may be the energy of transformation.

It is the energy of moving from one state of being to the next  
creating light - creating hope for tomorrow – or even the next moment.  
Your next moment – my next moment – our next moment

When we find ourselves in situations of tension -  
we may actually be in a place of potential.

We might be on the verge of a new attitude  
toward the problems we are trying to solve.  
We might be on the verge of a new way to love the world –  
or even our neighbor –  
which is harder because they are right there in front of us.



It's all to say that this experience of the disciples  
and all those people in Jerusalem that day  
(while bizarre in our way of thinking today)  
really may be using a powerful metaphor – St. Elmo's fire -  
to explain what comforted and compelled them  
to go out and spread the message.

Perhaps they wrote the story because they wanted us  
to catch a glimpse of the glow around one another -  
wanted us to see the divine in each other.

Perhaps they wanted us to hear a common message -  
in the different ways we hear.

And perhaps they wanted to share  
their amazing experience of the holy  
with us today.

Amen