

Wind and Flame

Acts 2:1-21

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The book of Acts, one of the most exciting books in the whole of scripture begins with a promise to his disciples on the occasion of Jesus' ascension and then comes the moment of preparation and empowerment for the mission Jesus is sending them out to accomplish and finally the amazing story of how in early church through the apostles carried out that mission as they moved out into all the world. The promise was that Jesus would return to them in due time but also that prior to his physical return he would send the Holy Spirit to them to equip, empower and prepare them for that work of reaching out to all the world with the good news of the gospel, and that is precisely what happens in the book of Acts.

Indeed, if you have your Bibles open in front of you just look at verse 8 of chapter 1 which is in one sentence an outline of Luke's record of the history of the early church recorded in what we call "The Acts of the Apostles." It reads:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

The book then flashes this out as the Apostles begin in Jerusalem, branch out into Judea which surrounds Jerusalem, moves out into dreaded Samaria beyond Judea and ends up through Paul and the Apostles going to the ends of the earth as they knew it. Like throwing a pebble into a pond the concentric circles of the spread of the gospel and the expansive growth of the church moves out ever farther and farther.

So, Jesus makes the promise at his ascension and the preparation and empowerment comes with the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost about which we read in chapter 2 on this Pentecost Sunday. It is no mistake to regard Pentecost as the real birthday of the church of Jesus Christ. It is truly a red-letter day for Christians around the world and red is our liturgical color as you can see over your TV's and monitors.

Just a few years ago someone asked me how my mind and convictions may have changed over the course of my ministry, which goes back now well over fifty years. It was an intriguing question that prompted a lot of reflection and soul-searching. I can think of many ways in which new discoveries or new lessons learned have shaped my beliefs and actions. But I would say most if not all of these changes have related in some way to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. I have learned over the years that the Holy Spirit is far more illuminating, more

transformative, more empowering and more important than I or we as Presbyterians have historically understood. And that Spirit remains alive and active and engaged in God's world today often beyond our seeing and our knowing.

Two weeks ago, I said that the ascension of Jesus is a festival in the church that we often forget completely. Several of you have written saying you have never heard a sermon on the ascension, and neither had I for most of my life in the church, so I was not surprised by your admission. But today I wish to say that if ascension is forgotten, Pentecost is at least ignored or de-emphasized.

To be completely candid, I did not have a very clear or informed understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit when I entered the ministry some decades ago. Oh, I acknowledged the Trinity for sure as a doctrine of the church, that God had revealed God's self as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But I know more about fathers and sons than I know about spirits! Persons are tangible and visible. I could envision a father and a son. But a spirit?? Not so much.

Our Presbyterian and Reformed forbearers frankly had not helped me much in this regard. Of the four great festivals of Christendom, Pentecost was by far the least emphasized and seemingly rather the least important. Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter were well understood and central to the faith – but Pentecost? If someone had told me before I went to seminary that Pentecost was only for Pentecostals, they probably would not have gotten an argument out of me. What did I know? Yes, I was familiar with some of the excesses and dangers associated with an undue emphasis on the Holy Spirit among some of the more charismatic denominations, but knowing what was not right did not help me very much in knowing what was right, and, in fact, very good.

One evening in a former church, I went with a group of elders to a minor league baseball game. When we emerged from the stadium at the end of the game and went into the parking lot there were flyers that had been placed on all of the cars, ours included. They were advertising what was called a "Holy Ghost Revival" at the Holiday Inn motel. One of the fellow elders commented: "I am not sure what a "Holy Ghost Revival" is but it doesn't sound like something many of us Presbyterians would be lining up to attend!

At any rate, I was not alone in this inadequate and distorted understanding of the Holy Spirit or in the lack of attention given to the subject. When our Reformer ancestors were drafting *Westminster Confession of Faith*, they spent five and a half years trying to articulate the faith of the church. But guess what? They largely ignored the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The chapter on the Holy Spirit in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was not added until 1942 by a vote of the Presbyterian General Assembly. And all this despite the fact that our

spiritual forebearer, John Calvin, deals with the Holy Spirit in chapter one of his seminal work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. What is more, he is sometimes referred to as “the theologian of the Holy Spirit.”

Scripture itself is not always helpful in clearing up the confusion about the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and the life of the church. Sometimes it quite frankly adds to the confusion. In Acts 16:6-7, Luke speaks of the Holy Spirit and then turns around and refers to the Spirit as the “Spirit of Jesus.” While that is the way I personally think of the Spirit, some theologians say that is an inappropriate confusing the two persons of the Trinity. But I do not regard that as problematic.

So, the point is, God’s people in a sense have always struggled to distinguish and articulate the Holy Spirit and how this third person of the Godhead is at work within us and about us. We Presbyterians may be more in touch with what we do not believe about the Holy Spirit than we are with what we do believe.

For example, we do not believe that following one’s confession of faith and baptism there has to be a second baptism of the Holy Spirit, as some churches teach. They say you can have Jesus but not have the Holy Spirit in your life. Yet Paul says in *1 Corinthians 12:30* that no one can say “Jesus is Lord” apart from the Holy Spirit.

Nor do we Presbyterians believe, as other people do, that some have more of the Spirit than others, as if the Holy Spirit can be divided and dispersed in varying proportions. *John 3:34* says that God gives his Spirit without measure. It may well be that some people are more sensitive to and responsive to the person and work of the Holy Spirit, but if God is in our lives, if Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, then the Holy Spirit is of necessity within us and among us.

Neither are we among those Christians who believe that the signs of the Spirit’s presence are necessarily those charismatic gifts such as speaking in tongues, physical healing, and prophesy. We may not deny that the Spirit works in these ways in the lives of some, though we are much more comfortable in talking about the gift of love as “the more excellent way.” We would rather emphasize the fruits of the Spirit such as those mentioned by Paul in *Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)*

Nevertheless, knowing what we do not believe is hardly sufficient when it comes to the knowledge of the Holy Spirit. What is it that we do believe, that we do affirm on this Pentecost Sunday, this red letter day on the liturgical calendar of the Christian church?

To begin with, apart from Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we would not have God in the present tense. Yes, we would still have the Jesus of history behind us and even the Christ of faith above us, and the expectation of the return of Jesus ahead of us in the future. But the living Lord in our present lives would be strangely absent. Halford Luccock argued years ago that all too much of contemporary Christianity is focused on looking into the past rather than looking at the present. The Holy Spirit is God in the present tense. We need to be aware of and responsive to what God is doing in our life and times and not allow what God has done in the past or will do in the future distract us from what God is calling and equipping us to do right now.

So, part of what Pentecost is about is bringing the risen and reigning Lord into the present tense. In *John 14*, Jesus tells his disciples that he will “not leave them orphaned.” (14-18) He said that shortly before he took leave of them, but he then encouraged them by saying that the Father would send an Advocate (a.k.a., the Holy Spirit) and the Spirit would teach them everything and remind them of all that he had said. In chapter 16, John adds that the coming Spirit will guide the disciples into all truth because there are many things yet to tell them which they could not bear at that moment. (16:12) The Holy Spirit is the Lord God relating to and speaking to his people in the present tense of every age. God is always present with his people through his Spirit and through his Word. In a sense, the Holy Spirit is God’s “alter ego,” God’s other self, we might say. The Spirit wasn’t needed so much when Jesus was present with his disciples. But following his death, resurrection and ascension, when he was released from his temporal and spatial body, he returned in spiritual power in the form of the Spirit, the coming gift he had promised. Pentecost is the coming of God in a new and larger dimension, the real presence of God beyond all time and space.

The Holy Spirit is also the illuminator of the human mind. Without the Spirit we could not really hear God’s word in scripture or know how to apply it. Only with the aid of the Holy Spirit the scriptures begin to make sense and come alive for us. The Spirit breathes life into the Word and thus we are able to hear and understand with greater clarity and conviction what God is saying to us, just like at Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit is also the regenerator of the human heart. The Spirit leads us to conviction, repentance and faith. That is to say the Spirit is responsible for our salvation. We cannot predict or control the Spirit. As Jesus told his night visitor, Nicodemus, “the wind” (or Spirit) blows where he chooses and you can hear the sound of it but you cannot know from which it comes or whither it goes.” (John 3:8)

So, the Holy Spirit is God in the present tense. The Holy Spirit is the illuminator of the human mind and regenerator of the human heart. In addition, the Holy Spirit is the recreator, the re-fashioner of human life. It is the Holy Spirit who transforms us and enables us to grow

more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. I have already said that salvation is a work of the Spirit, but so too is the work of sanctification. Theologically, justification is the act whereby a person is declared holy, and that not on the basis of his or her own merit but on the basis of what God has done for the believer. Sanctification is the process of growing in holiness, a task that is never fully accomplished in this lifetime. But continually, the Holy Spirit works within us and about us to shape us into the people we can potentially be in Christ and to shape our communities of faith into what God would have his church be as well.

There are a lot of people in life who are interested in being saved but not as many who are interested in being sanctified. But the same Spirit who draws us to the living God, who enables us to accept God's love and acceptance of us, now works in our hearts and minds and lives in such a way that we are continuously being transformed and changed so that we might show the fruits of the Spirit at work within us --- *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. Therefore, the Spirit thus is a promise and a threat, because the Spirit is forever changing us, enabling us to give up some things and take on other things.

Actually, when I think about how my mind and heart, my faith and works have changed over the years I would have to say that the Holy Spirit is largely responsible. So, I guess you can blame or credit the Spirit for some of those mid-faith adjustments to life and thought. But that should not surprise us either. One of the more profound and controversial works of the Spirit is that of leading us to new truths and new perceptions of old truths.

In his farewell discourse to his disciples Jesus says this: *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."* (John 16:12-13)

I think it is somewhat telling that the Holy Spirit was first revealed in wind and flame --- both of which, like the Holy Spirit, can be empowering or threatening, promising or perilous. We well know that fire and the heat it produces have the potential of destroying things and also creating energy. The same could be said for wind. Wind too can destroy or be harnessed to provide energy.

March 3, 1966 is the day I had a vision etched in my memory. I was a freshman in college, but I worked on weekday afternoons from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. at the regional Allstate Insurance company offices. It was the last and the worst job I ever had prior to serving on a staff of a church. My assignment was to go through scores and scores of desks, in offices and rooms after the personnel had gone home for the day. I was charged with looking for lost files. Every desk had stacks of files that people were working on and I had to compare the numbers

on the files with a long list of numbers of missing files. It was a monotonous, lonely, depressing, exhausting and eye-straining assignment. But on that particular Thursday as I arrived to work and was about to enter the back of the building, looked to the south from the offices in north Jackson and saw an awesome and massive tornado moving from west to east across the southern horizon. It was not coming in my direction so I stood there mesmerized knowing that what I was watching would no doubt be devastating to people and property in its wake. As it turned out it was the most violent kind of tornado, an F-5, and cut a swath of destruction through Mississippi and Alabama over the course of three hours. Some 518 people were injured, and 58 people were killed. Homes and cars were tossed about, trees were uprooted, and an entire shopping center called Candlestick Park was leveled. The damage was later set at countless millions of dollars.

So yes, wind can destroy for it can alter lives and landscape, but wind can also comfort and empower as we well know. It can turn turbines making energy available for countless people. Driving out west on our sabbatical years ago, Tita and I drove past vast fields of windmills generating power.

Like wind and flame, the Holy Spirit comes among us still to bring about change that often upsets and disturbs us but also charges us with an energy to live in new ways that better serve God and neighbor. Only through the work of this mysterious Spirit of God can we as individuals in this church grow and mature and develop in ways that only the Spirit can make possible. Paul writes to the Corinthians saying, *"All of us...are being transformed into the image (of Christ) from one degree to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."* (2 Cor. 3:18)

So the Holy Spirit like the wind and flame is a transformational force, clearing away some things that we might prefer not to give up and creating new and better things that help us become what our Lord is calling us to be, and to do what our Lord is calling us to do.

The New Testament closes in Revelation with a prayer that has forever been on the lips of Christian disciples, maranatha, which means "Come, O Lord." But until the Lord returns physically at the end of time, we should celebrate on Pentecost and beyond that the Lord is already spiritually present with us right now through his Holy Spirit. His presence constitutes both promise and peril. He comes to love us as we are but also loves us too much to leave us as we are, so change is inevitable. He comes a refiner's fire, removing the impurities, burning away the dross and fashioning us into his beloved community, united in him, and empowered for God's purposes. Pentecost, therefore, is the birthday of this reformed and reforming community. Amen and amen.

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, in your quickening power and illumine our minds and regenerate our hearts and recreate our very lives so that we may be new creations in and for Christ Jesus, and in whose name we pray.