

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come; they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13 But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

17 ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

19 And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

20 The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

## MYSTERY

We study this story each year. I have thirteen sermons on this passage in my files! But, I have to admit that even though I'm very familiar with this passage, it still seems very mysterious.

The church cannot be born without the power of the Spirit. And yet in this passage the Spirit seems to turn things inside out and upside down in a way that I quite frankly find disturbing.

I'm not the only one. Some who first witnessed the coming of the Spirit found that experience profoundly unsettling.

The story begins with a wild descent of the Holy Spirit from above. The disciples hear a sound like the rush of a violent wind. They see tongues like fire that appear among them and rest on them.

Notice that the text says it was "like" the rush of a violent wind and "like" fire but not exactly. This was something entirely new.

The words should not be taken literally. They symbolize the surprising power that comes from upon high and disrupts business as usual. It was more than a windstorm or a firestorm.

It was the presence of God.

And then these disciples who have been baptized by the Spirit begin to speak. But, they do not speak in their native tongue. They begin to speak in other languages as the Spirit gives them ability.

There are Jews in Jerusalem from all over the ancient world. They have come to celebrate Pentecost. And they all hear disciples speaking about God's deeds of power in their own language.

## NEW WINE

We know what it's like to be in a place where everyone is speaking in a foreign language. We call it the Florida Mall.

It's kind of neat to hear the different tongues of the world all being spoken in one place. But, it's also kind of confusing as well.

And so it was on the day of Pentecost. Some were amazed and wondered what this might mean. But, others said,

“This cacophony of languages is crazy and confusing. These people have had too much Boone's Farm. They've had too much cheap wine, too much new wine.”

The church is born by the power of the Spirit. And what happens first? Some folks say, “These people are drunk!”

Can you imagine someone coming into our church and accusing us of the same thing? These people have had too much wine. They are out of control.

Maybe in some other churches they might say that. But, they won't say that about us will they?

We're God's frozen chosen. We're the ones who insist on doing everything decently and in order. If we were at that first Pentecost we might have been among those who accused those first disciples of have too much new wine.

But, today's lesson suggests a process that is not so decent and orderly. Why else would they accuse those first disciples of being drunk?

I've always been fascinated by this accusation. Why would they say such a thing of those first disciples?

Maybe we can begin to understand what was going on by asking, “What is it like to be drunk?”

Now I'm no expert on this. After all, I'm a minister.

But, I have been to college, and from what I've observed in others, when you're drunk you're out of control. You're no longer reasonable. You say things and do things that you wouldn't do and say if you were sober.

So maybe when the Spirit comes upon us we are out of control in a good way. Maybe the Spirit causes us to say things and do things that we wouldn't normally say and do in the service of God's kingdom.

Peter responds to the scoffing crowd by saying, "We're not drunk. It's only nine in the morning! The bars aren't open yet!"

And he was right. They weren't drunk with wine.

But, in a way the crowd was right as well. The disciples were drunk. They were drunk in the Spirit. That had tasted the new wine of God's kingdom. A strange kind of "drunkenness" marks the birth of the church at Pentecost.

And I would suggest that this same out of control Spirit is at the heart of the church today.

#### THE OLD PASSES AWAY

Peter tells the crowd that they are witnessing the fulfillment of prophecy. God is throwing a monkey wrench into their buttoned down, conservative religion. God is changing things.

They shouldn't be surprised.

The prophet Joel talked about this amazing day of the Lord long ago. He talked about that time when old men would dream dreams and young men would see visions. He talked about that time when even slaves, men and women would be baptized in the Spirit of God and preach God's word.

The time had come. But, some were not comfortable with this new Spirit.

When God comes into the lives of his people sometimes his presence is welcome. But, more often his presence is not welcome.

Why?

The presence of God makes us feel uncomfortable. The Spirit of God disrupts the spirit of our neatly ordered world. The Spirit of God tears down the old community so that a new community can be created.

And we like our old community. We like the old ways. We don't want our decent and orderly world disrupted by the coming of the Spirit.

And so the coming of God's Spirit is like a violent wind or a tongue of fire. God blows down and burns up the old in order to make way for the new.

It was true then. And it is true now.

In order for the new to be born the old has to pass away.

## CHANGED DISCIPLES

I am struck by the contrast between what the disciples were like before receiving the Spirit and what they are like after receiving the Spirit. Before the Spirit baptized them they were afraid of their own shadow. The Bible tells us they were huddled behind closed doors.

They weren't worried about preaching the gospel. They were worried about staying alive. They didn't want to be crucified.

When Jesus told them to wait for the coming of the Spirit, that was not a problem. They didn't want to go anywhere or do anything. Despite having seen the risen Christ, they still had no plan and very little hope.

They had to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Spirit. Only the Spirit of the living God could give them a future. Only the Spirit of the living God could change frightened cowards into courageous disciples.

And the Spirit did just that. On Pentecost heaven came down and frightened disciples learned to speak a new language. And that living Word changed the world.

The Spirit still comes and lives are still changed by the power that comes from above. God is still teaching us to speak the language of forgiveness and hope. God is still teaching us to proclaim good news in a world that is obsessed with bad news.

Isn't this a great story for our world? In our chaotic and frightening world we still hide behind locked doors, wrapped up in our private concerns.

But, God has a plan to save us. The mighty wind of God's Spirit is going to blow down the locked doors in our life. The flame of God's Spirit is going to burn up those things that distract us.

The mighty wind of God's Spirit is going to help us do what we cannot do on our own. The mighty wind of God's Spirit is going to teach us to speak a new language, the language of faith, hope and love.

The mighty wind of God's Spirit is going to take us where we will not or cannot go on our own.

### A CHANGED CROWD

This was certainly true of those who first witnessed the coming of God's Spirit. Many of those who attributed the strange goings on to public drunkenness finally got the message.

You see Peter's sermon continues well beyond our lesson for today. Peter tells the people that Jesus was definitely from God. His signs and miracles attested to that fact. (In fact many of them had seen those miracles. They knew what Peter was talking about.)

But, then Peter drove home the point of the sermon.

He said that Jesus was more than a miracle worker. He was the Messiah and he was the Son of God. God raised him from the dead, and he ascended into heaven. Jesus received the Spirit of power that they were now witnessing.

He told the doubting crowd, "And God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." They were cut to the quick by this statement and they asked, "What shall we do?"

And Peter told them, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus."

And they gladly do it. They repent. They go in a totally new direction.

The power of the Spirit creates a new fellowship. People who had been total strangers now become a family of faith. They break bread together and share their lives with each other. Gracious hospitality is the first sign of this new life in the Spirit.

They go out in the name of Jesus and tell others what they have seen and heard.

And by the power of the Spirit the message is heard in other places and lives are changed.

## ILLUMINATION

That's still what Pentecost is all about. It's about effective communication. The Spirit enables the Word to be preached with power.

Every week before I read the Scripture and preach I voice a short prayer. We call it the prayer of illumination. The prayer is so short you may not even notice it so much.

But, it's an important prayer.

It's our way of acknowledging that only the power of the Spirit can use the Word to change hearts and minds.

No one is ever changed because I am such a persuasive and winsome preacher. That kind of change can only come when the Spirit enables speech to be translated into a powerful Word of hope. The Spirit still enables the Word to become flesh and dwell among us.

I think it's important for us to note that Luke does not say those first disciples "spoke in tongues". This would suggest a language that is incomprehensible, an orgy of sound that some might mistake for drunkenness.

This was how the ancient world understood spirituality. It was mystical, and often resulted in unrestrained emotional outbursts. (Some still think of spirituality in these terms.)

There is certainly a sense of mystery and emotion in our passage for today, but Luke tells us that there is also reason and purpose in the work of the Spirit.

Luke says that the disciples spoke in "other tongues" or "other languages." Actually that last translation is a more literal translation. The miracle is the miracle of understanding.

The Spirit enables people to hear the gospel clearly and completely. The Spirit changes the minds and the hearts of those who hear.

The Spirit changes words into the Word with a capital “W”.

## THE CHURCH ON THE WAY

It’s a sin for us in the church to hunker down behind closed doors as if nothing had ever happened. The church was not created to be a resting place for the anxious.

The church was created to be a launching pad for a whole new world.

You often hear people talk about trying to get back to being a New Testament Church. But, there’s really no ancient, old church to come back home to.

The New Testament Church as we have mentioned before was called The Way. They followed the way of Jesus, and they were always on the way to somewhere else and something new.

I like the way Annie Dillard describes the work of the Spirit in the church. She says that if we really understood the power of the Spirit we would equip the pews with seat belts, and we would wear crash helmets to church.

The Spirit is a great comfort to those who are anxious and afflicted. But, the Spirit also catapults us out of the building and into mission.

The Greek word for church is “ekklesia” which means “called out.” We are the people who are called out of our old life in order to do the work of the Kingdom.

Did you know that in the church our job is to speak in other tongues? The Spirit enables us to find the language to tell our story to people who don’t speak our language.

The church’s job is not to long for the good old days.

The church’s job is to be swayed by the wind of the Spirit. The church’s job is to get fired up and be born again by the power of the Word, the Word that comes from upon high.

The church's job is to hear God more clearly as He speaks to us through the Spirit of Christ.

That's how the church began, and that's the only way we can continue to be the church.

I wonder. What is the Spirit prompting us to do and say? Where might we be led to go? What might we be led to say?

It's enough to make you drunk with the possibilities.

Amen.