

**Heads and Hearts on Fire**

May 15, 2016

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**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.'

## NOT A GENTLE BREEZE

The Holy Spirit can come like a gentle breeze.  
The Holy Spirit can come to us as the still small voice.  
The Holy Spirit can be the Spirit of Comfort in our time of need.

But, sometimes the Holy Spirit is like a hurricane that swoops in and changes things in an instant.

The presence of the Spirit can be comforting.  
But, the presence of the Spirit can also be disruptive and disturbing.

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was more like a hurricane than a gentle breeze.

Those of us who have been here for a while know all about hurricanes.  
Hurricanes are destructive.  
They last only an hour or two, but when they are over it seems like things will never be the same again.

Many of us had a blue tarp on our roof for many weeks after the hurricanes came.

How long did we run the chainsaws in order to clean out the trees that had fallen in our church parking lot? It seemed like forever.

How long did it take us to finally remove the debris from the side of the road and get our building back in shape? Almost a year.

Our world was turned upside down by this violent wind.

And even now when Tom Terry talks about the coming of a violent wind, we pay attention.

But, I also have to say that after our church was repaired, it was in better shape than it was before the coming of that violent wind. It was a painful process, but in the end we had a better church building. Perhaps the coming of the Spirit to the early church was similar in this way.

## WIND AND FIRE

According to the Bible, the sound of the Spirit was like the rush of a violent wind.

And it filled the whole house. Just as everyone is affected by the coming of a hurricane, so everyone was affected by the coming of the Spirit.

But, the Spirit brought more than just a big wind. It also brought fire.

These past few weeks the disruption that fire can cause has been in the news.

Whole communities were evacuated and many homes and ecosystems were destroyed.

Like wind, fire also represents something that changes the landscape forever.

The Bible tells us that when the violent wind of the Spirit filled the home where they were sitting, tongues as of fire also rested on each of the disciples.

I wonder if there is any significance to the fact that the disciples are portrayed as sitting.

Up until this time the disciples do not seem to be very courageous. They fell asleep when asked to pray in the Garden. They ran away when Jesus is put on trial.

After the resurrection and right before his ascension Jesus tells the disciples that they will be his witnesses throughout the world.

But, even the ascension does not get them on the move. They are portrayed as standing around looking to the heavens until two angels come and ask, "Why are you standing around looking up into the sky? You have a job to do."

In John's gospel the disciples are portrayed as staying behind locked doors for fear of the authorities. The disciples seem to prefer quiet reflection to courageous action.

## HEADS AND HEARTS ON FIRE

The coming of the Spirit changes all that. The wind of the Spirit is so violent and the flame of the Spirit is so intense that sitting is no longer an option.

All the disciples (about 120 at the time) began to proclaim the gospel to a diverse and bewildered crowd.

We sometimes talk about somebody running around like his "head is on fire".

Well that's what happens to the disciples.

There will be no more sitting around for these disciples.

When Pentecost comes the disciples find that their heads ... and their hearts are on fire.

Life for the disciples will never be the same again.

## THE GIFT OF LANGUAGE

The disciples are filled with this fiery, rushing wind, and they are given a unique gift.

They begin to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

Move over Rosetta Stone.

The school of the Spirit is much faster when it comes to learning a language.

The people are amazed.

They come from all over the world.

But, they hear the gospel in their own language.

What is the significance of this miracle?

Perhaps it's the Tower of Babel in reverse.

In story of the Tower of Babel, the people of the world think they can be like God, or at least they think that they can build a tower that will reach heaven where God lives.

But, of course, their excessive pride is punished.

God confuses their languages.

And since they can't understand each other, their ambitious building project has to be abandoned.

In our lesson for today, the story is reversed.

Human beings do not try to reach the heavens.

Heaven reaches down to humanity.

The Spirit of the living God fills His people.

And language is no longer a barrier.

God gives them the gift of understanding.

The disciples are miraculously able to speak in other languages.

There are Jews from all over the ancient world in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival who witness this miracle.

Our lesson for today lists all of those countries.

There are quite a few.

This miracle would be like someone speaking before the United Nations and all the representatives hear the message in their own language.

All the nations of the world would be gathered in one place.

There would be Chinese, Russians, Americans, French, Korean, Arabs, and you name it ...

And all of them would hear the message in their own language.  
How do you think they would respond to that message?

Everyone would go back home and say,  
“You won’t believe what happened at the UN today.”  
And then they would tell the story.

People would be amazed and perplexed and skeptical.  
But, everyone would want to know the answer to one question.  
What does this mean?

That’s what happened in our lesson for today.

To make the miracle even more impressive, all of the disciples are obviously from Galilee.  
Everyone knew that these backwoods Galileans couldn’t speak another language.  
They could barely speak Aramaic.

But, here they were proclaiming the gospel in all the languages of the world.  
What was going on here?

**TWO RESPONSES TO THE MIRACLE**  
How would you respond to a miracle like this?

You probably would be, like those who first witnessed this miracle, “amazed and astonished and perplexed”.

And you would ask, “What does it mean?”

But, there were some others who were not so impressed.  
Some thought it was crazy talk, gibberish.  
They joked and said,

“Galileans can’t speak Chinese.  
These guys have had too much to drink.  
They are filled with new wine.”

This has always puzzled me.

Since when do drunks suddenly learn how to speak foreign languages?  
When people are drunk, they can't even speak their own language!

All I can think of is that the coming of the Spirit was so overwhelming that it was like they were drunk. All those languages and all that commotion made for a confused situation.

## A FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY

But, Peter clears up that misunderstanding right away.  
He says,

"These guys aren't drunk.  
It's only nine o'clock in the morning.  
The bars aren't open yet!"

So, what's going on?  
Peter tells them that it's a fulfillment of prophecy.  
He said,

"The prophet Joel talked about this long ago.  
He envisioned a time when God would pour out his Spirit on everyone.

In that day sons and daughters would prophesy.  
Young men would dream dreams.  
Old men would see visions.

Even slaves, both men and women, will prophesy in those days.

There will also be signs in the heavens when those days come.  
The sun will turn black and the moon will turn blood red."

And Peter concludes,

"Those days have come.  
The great and glorious day of the Lord has come upon us.  
And everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

## A NEW CREATION AND THE LANGUAGE OF GRACE

We sometimes say that Pentecost was the birthday of the church.  
And that's true as far as it goes.  
But, that interpretation is not big enough.

Pentecost was the beginning of a new creation.  
Just as God created the heavens and the earth,  
now God was recreating the world through the power of His Spirit.

That's why there were signs in the heavens.

The sun turned black when Jesus was crucified.  
But, it was not a sign of the end.  
It was the sign of a new beginning.

And the disciples whose heads and hearts were on fire told a story of hope  
for all people.  
In a world filled with confusion, the Spirit brought understanding.

That's still the work of the Spirit.  
In a world filled with confusion, we are charged to help people understand  
the message of God's grace.

The language of grace will be a new tongue for the world in which we live.  
Our world quite often speaks only of judgment and fear.

But, the language of God's grace is universal.  
And all who hear it will understand what it means.  
For many it will be exactly what they need to hear.

But others, of course, will be perplexed by this new language.

And some will reject it with disdain.  
What do you mean when you say that we should love our enemies?  
What do you mean that we should do good to those who persecute us?

That's crazy.  
You've had too much cheap wine!

The language of grace can be quite shocking to those who speak a lan-  
guage of fear and hate.

Today many still criticize the disciples of Jesus in the same way. They think we must be joking or drunk when we talk about grace that is so radical and inclusive.

But, we're not drunk, at least not on cheap wine.  
We're filled with the Spirit.

#### A VISION OF A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

We've been given a vision of a new heaven and a new earth.  
Our heads and our hearts have been set on fire by a hope that is eternal.

Some of us are old.  
Some of us are young.  
We come from different places and speak different languages.

But, none of that matters.  
We have the same dream.

We dream of a world where sin is forgiven, and life is eternal.  
We dream of a world where everyone, men and women, slave and free are all one in Christ Jesus.

To paraphrase the hymn:  
We dream of a world where there is no East or West.  
We dream of a world where there is no North or South.  
But, one great family of faith created by the grace of God in Jesus the Christ.

We dream of a world where everyone who calls upon the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved.

When the Spirit of God comes alongside us, that dream becomes reality.  
The language of grace that seemed so foreign becomes our native tongue.

#### PRAYING IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE

Amy Allen told of working as a chaplain at a large public hospital in Dallas, Texas.

Many of the people who came into that hospital were Hispanic so as a part of her orientation, she was given a set of index cards with simple Spanish phrases and prayers.

One day, not long after she had begun this position, she was called to the room of a frantic, elderly woman. The nurses were trying to calm her down, but she was agitated and kept chiding them in Spanish.

The nurses asked, "What can you do chaplain?"

Amy said,

"I was twenty one years old.

I knew only the Spanish that was written on my little index card.

And I knew even less about how to calm down frantic patients in a hospital.

So I did the only thing I could think to do.

I pulled out my index card and began to read, 'Padre nuestro...' The Lord's prayer.

I'm sure my pronunciation was horrible.

But, the woman stopped, smiled, bowed her head and softly joined in the prayer as I continued."

Amy likened this to the miracle of Pentecost.

The gospel was first proclaimed by apostles who spoke a language that was not their own.

And as we read the book of Acts we learn that the apostles continued to make accommodations so that people from other lands so might understand and receive the gospel.

We read about how the apostles traveled all over the ancient world and adapted to different diets, different cultural practices, and different religions.

They did not demand that the converts come to them.

They brought the good news about Jesus to the people where they were.

They learned to "speak their language" for the sake of the gospel.

Speaking another person's language is about more than just understanding.

It's about acceptance.

It's about learning to see the person who comes from another place as a unique and valued child of God.

One Greek word for the Holy Spirit is the word Paraclete.

It's a compound word that means literally, "to come alongside another".

In this sense the Spirit is an advocate.

The Spirit comes alongside a person to provide comfort and encouragement.

I suspect that that the Spirit invites us to share this task.

We too are invited to come alongside another person, to share their lives, their hopes and their dreams ... and to encourage them with a hope that is eternal.

That's what this story is really all about.

It about speaking another person's language out of love.

It's learning to speak about God's love in as many ways as possible.

When our heads and our hearts are on fire, we can't help but dream bigger dreams.

That's Pentecost.

That's the work of the Spirit.

And ... that fiery wind still blows.

Amen.