

Sermon: Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21)  
Christ Church Riverdale, 23 May 2009  
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Acts 2: 1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. <sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.' <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup>'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. <sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. <sup>19</sup>And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. <sup>20</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. <sup>21</sup>Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

"All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" Powerful experiences of the Holy can look like something very different to the rest of the world. The Holy Spirit is mysterious, but no less real. The Holy Spirit doesn't come on everybody in Jerusalem that day or even a random group of people, but a group of the followers of Jesus--about 120 men and women who already had a powerful common bond, a common experience. And yet on the outside this outpouring of the Spirit didn't make sense; it wasn't easily explainable, so the easiest thing to do is dismiss it--they're just drunk on cheap wine!

Far more than first-century Jerusalem, our society values what can be measured, analyzed and repeated. "Metrics" is a buzzword in corporate America and in organizations that try to emulate corporations. But I'm here to tell you, you can't measure the Holy Spirit; can't weigh it, photograph it, or analyze it scientifically. The Holy Spirit is mysterious, but no less real.

In the Apostles' Creed we will say in a few minutes, we describe God the Father, say a good bit more about Jesus, and then "I believe in the Holy Spirit," period,

then on to the Holy catholic Church. The Holy Spirit is mysterious, but no less real. I'd like to reflect with you on two questions this morning: How did the Holy Spirit come upon those 120 or so believers on the church's first Pentecost? And why do we care--what difference does it make?

"When the day of Pentecost had come," we read, "[the disciples] were all together in one place." The coming of the Holy Spirit is not an individual experience of people sitting around reading the Bible on their Kindles, but a group experience. This is also true in the rest of the New Testament. It took the disciples getting out of their homes and choosing to gather, choosing to spend time together for them to hear the rushing wind, feel the tongues like fire.

This past week our Jewish neighbors observed Shavuot--the feast of weeks, or Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. Shavuot was a feast where Jews were supposed to gather in Jerusalem. And so we read that the followers of Jesus--Jews themselves--were in Jerusalem for the first pilgrimage feast after they experienced Jesus risen from the dead. They were in Jerusalem for Pentecost as they had been no telling how many times before. In other words, they kept showing up for the ordinary religious observances, which put them in the position to have an experience that was anything but ordinary.

The Bible is very economical in what it records--writing was expensive, after all--and so we don't read much there about the ordinary. We read about the Holy Spirit sounding like a rushing wind, divided tongues like fire; speaking in different languages, taking place on one Pentecost out of many for these disciples. We don't suffer from an overabundance of patience in our society. We tend to want the powerful experience all the time. But the Holy Spirit comes on the disciples in the course of their normal religious observances. Showing up for those observances together is what put them in the place to receive the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit and explode with the Good News of God!

Why do we care? The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost gave the followers of Jesus the power is to reach out. No longer would they huddle together for safety within their own group, but would share the good news with people from all over. The good news of Jesus is for the world, not just those who were with him during his time on earth. You and I are here in this church today as a direct result of the power of the Holy Spirit, because without the Spirit there would be no church, no need for a church. The Holy Spirit is mysterious, but no less real.

Not only has the Holy Spirit given us the church, the Spirit continues to give us life. Try for a minute to be completely still, completely stiff, holding your breath. Not a way to live, is it? The Holy Spirit is our breath, our life as Christians, not something we can do without or stockpile or "securitize," but something we need to trust will be there as much as we trust our next breath. The Holy Spirit is mysterious but no less real.

Different types of power have the potential to be used for great good and for great harm. Fire can cook your food or burn the house down. Wind can power a beautiful sailboat or destroy a neighborhood. Witness how important the recent agreement with Iran about nuclear materials is. They have agreed to swap uranium that can be processed into weapons-grade material for uranium already processed into rods for a nuclear power plant. The source of power is the same--unstable atoms of Uranium 235--but the way it can be used--the effects of the power

for energy or to destroy are completely opposite.

So there are different spirits--some holy and some not. We see the difference in what they accomplish. Parking an SUV full of explosives in Times Square was an act of spirit--not for material gain but of spirit--hateful, violent spirit. People who risk their lives to make others safe are also acting in spirit--not for material gain but loving, sacrificing spirit. The Holy Spirit is mysterious but no less real. So may we seek the gift of the Holy Spirit every day, to breathe the Spirit in deeply, sharing in the power of the early followers of Jesus to reach out, and experience the privilege of exploding with good news for God's world!

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