

As the Spirit Moves

Acts 2:1-21 (The Message translation)

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Prayer: *O God of Light, from whom every good gift comes, send your Spirit into our lives with the power of a mighty wind, and by the flame of your wisdom open the horizons of our minds...may the words of my mouth...*

Last week we considered the conclusion of the gospel of Luke with the image of the ascension of Jesus -- taken bodily away from the disciples into the heavens. And they returned to Jerusalem it says, "with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Those are the last words of the Gospel. They're left there... in the temple...blessing God... in good spirits and all... but it isn't really the end of anything. It's more like a cliff hanger... then what? So Acts begins with a recap, like any TV show, would orient their viewers "previously on our show..." and you can skip the preview if you are binging, but if it has been a week or more since your last installment, you might appreciate a little review of the highlights.

The beginning of Acts does that for us, Acts 1 begins:

Dear Theophilus, in the first volume of this book I wrote on everything that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he said good-bye to the apostles, the ones he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven.

The real action begins after the recap, in chapter 2 suddenly something like a strong rushing wind, filled the entire house where they were. It is just what Jesus said would happen at the end of Luke's gospel: "stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high..." Now, if you were clothed with power from on high, when would you know it? What is that? What does it look like?

The way Acts describes it, it is the day the Holy Spirit came to the disciples and rested on each of them, like tongues of fire, allowing for the hearing and the understanding of the good news of Jesus beginning in Jerusalem and emanating throughout the ancient world.

In the Message translation:

There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were blown away. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"

*Parthians, Medes, and Elamites;
Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene;
Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes;
Even Cretans and Arabs!*

"They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!"

If you look at the places named in this list, they form a circle around Jerusalem, representing the 12 signs of the zodiac. Meaning, everyone, all kinds of people, in all their regional particularity, were hearing the message that only one chapter before just a few Galileans knew. It had been a private experience, but with the spirit now, are they wearing tongues of fire? It is more than just their own story. It is jumping the gate and is loose in the world. Free now, to change people in new places.

And while it is a pretty remarkable thing that happened to them 2000 years ago in Jerusalem, what they said then, and what I'd like to emphasize today, is that it will be a much more remarkable thing that is about to happen here.

If we take this seriously, if we pull this forward, (and not everyone will) the charge is to find a way to name how we understand God to be at work in our lives, to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ later today, and into next week. How will you explain it, when you're asked, "how was your week?" or "what did you do?" How will you give witness to what God has done for you...especially while things are not really perfect at all? Ever.

It has been described as trying to explain the wind, or breath itself. Something so close, so strong, vital, and elusive.

I recently read Tara Westover's Memoir, *Educated*, and in it she gives one of the best descriptions I have read of describing the effect of something invisible happening. The wind, the strong wind refers to something about to happen in human life. These words are from her prologue:

*The gales are strong this close to the mountain, as if the peak itself is exhaling. Down below, the valley is peaceful, undisturbed. Meanwhile our farm dances: the heavy conifer trees sway slowly, while the sagebrush and thistles quiver, bowing before every puff and pocket of air... The hill is paved with wild wheat. If the conifers and sage- brush are soloists, the wheat field is a corps de ballet, each stem following all the rest in bursts of movement, a million ballerinas bending, one after the other, as great gales dent their golden heads. The shape of that dent lasts only a moment, and is as close as anyone gets to seeing wind.*¹

This is the beginning of her memoir, and yes, this wind represents a changing spirit, a new thing, happening on her farm on the slopes of this mountain.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJg-HmGWw1k>

I wonder if the Holy Spirit is like that, the way wind moves over a mountain or a wheat field; you see each stalk bend differently but with the same force. A force to be reckoned with. Unseen until it is unmistakable.



Or is the Holy Spirit like sunlight through a window. This image is called "Pentecost" from a Methodist Church in Cape Town, South Africa. The lower bars represent the 12 Disciples, the upper red and yellow blocks represent the "Tongues of flame." Different sizes and colors represent the diversity of the Pentecost community. You can see a shadow across the top here, so you can imagine that the color will appear differently in changing light.

¹ *Educated, a Memoir*, Tara Westover, Random House, 2018, prologue

Is the Holy Spirit like water, around everywhere as oceans, lakes, rain, snow, fog, or a glass of water, even the water in our own bodies? Water connects us, and enables life. But a deluge is a problem of another kind. Living water, it's called in the gospels. Thirst for living water...

I have often wondered if the Holy Spirit is like music, unseen, sometimes speaking in a language we love, a favorite song written upon our hearts, other times completely unfamiliar, unknown. Perhaps it is like this piece of music the choir recorded for this service, which looks to many of you like music that we prepare for pandemic worship, yet this one was released by the Southern New England Conference, UCC for all to share. Where will it go, who will it speak to? What soul will hum it throughout their week, in private meditation.

What about here? Is the Holy Spirit like an empty church? Ready to be filled? Or is it like a full church, emptying into the world?

Next Sunday we are looking forward to welcoming you back for in person worship. But while we are away from one another I invite you to consider the chapter just finishing now in your own life, and the chapter just now able to begin.

**Spirit God,
blow into our lives,
move us to action,
break down the walls that separate us.
Where our language divides, offer us translation.
Where our fear overcomes, fill us with the fire of courage.
Where our lives are becalmed, fill our sails with wind,
moving us forward into the unknown future.**

Some discussion questions:

1. At the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus said: "stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high..." (Luke 24:49b) If you were clothed with power from on high, when would you know it? What is that? What does it look like? Would the rush of wind in Acts 2 be what you were waiting for?
2. How is the hand off between Luke and Acts and our present day discipleship? Do you need more information to be a disciple? More Holy Spirit? What resources would help you?
3. At the end of the sermon I use a number of images to describe what the Spirit is like:
 - wind on a field of wheat
 - light through stained glass
 - water in all its forms
 - music
 - an empty church filling, or a full church emptying into the world

What is your image, and why? explain...

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