



Sermon on Acts 2:1-21
Pastor Julie McCain, June 8, 2014

*Please pray with me. Speak, O Lord, in words that we can hear.
Open our hearts to your word, and plant the light of your truth deep in our hearts.
Amen.*

We catch the disciples in today's text when they are gathering together to celebrate Pentecost. It was a Jewish harvest celebration that came 50 days after Passover, so that means it's been 50 days since their Last Supper with Jesus, and almost as long since his death and resurrection.

As we heard last week, some of them watched as Jesus rose up into the clouds, with a parting promise:

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

But it's a promise that lacks specificity, that's short on details.

If those disciples were at all like us, and I think they were, they must have wondered: when will the Holy Spirit show up? What will it look like? What kind of power will we get? How will we witness to so many people?

There were, after all, only one hundred and twenty believers at that point. Only ten times the number of the original Apostles. And there's a big gap between 120 and the whole world.

Lacking online translators, twitter, facebook, or even text messages, it must have been entirely unclear to that small band of believers how Jesus' promise would ever come true.

That uncertainty is probably why just before our text, we hear that the disciples were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Sometimes, when we don't know the answer to the whys, the hows, or the whens, the best and the only thing we can do to calm ourselves and to find some peace is to do exactly that: to devote ourselves to prayer.

Often it is precisely when things are up in the air—when we are hanging on a promise but maybe don't have a clear sense and the details, that the Holy Spirit shows up and surprises us.

And the Holy Spirit does, indeed, surprise them. We can be sure that they do not expect violent winds, tongues of fire, or speaking in tongues.

So here's a question: if that same thing happened right here, right now: if a violent wind came in through that door, if flames appeared above everyone's heads, and if we all suddenly had the ability to speak different languages, how would you feel? What would you think?

-Amazed, confused, want to run away, we've all gone crazy.

We're told that that's basically the reaction the disciples had—they were amazed, bewildered, and perplexed.

And even now, when the violent wind or the gentle breath that is the Spirit shows up, blowing our hearts or our church in new directions, it can be equally amazing or bewildering at first.

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Still, Pentecost is a strange day for those of us who have never experienced any of the phenomena those disciples did. Some people, of course, claim that when the Spirit shows up, it will still look like that; others look back on that day with nostalgia and claim that the Spirit has simply stopped being quite as active or as powerful in our lives and our churches.

But Jesus' promise to the disciples that he would give them power through the Holy Spirit to witness to the ends of the earth did not have an expiration date. It is a promise to us still today, and we see evidence of it each and every day.

I'll name a few more, to get our imaginations going:

Martin Luther says that even the fact that we have faith in the risen Christ is evidence of God's Spirit.

Luther said this: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me by his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the truth faith."

Now it might sound strange that we can't just choose to believe on our own, *but even the very fact that we find ourselves with faith means that the Holy Spirit is in us and hard at work in our hearts.* And any time you see faith spring up in someone else, or yours or someone else's faith grow, smile and know that the Spirit is blowing through your hearts and lives.

In this place, we also have particular gifts that have been stirred up by the Spirit of God. Of course we know that everyone in the world, even non-Christians, have gifts and abilities.

But notice in our text that the ability to speak in other languages isn't poured out on the disciples for their own sake.

- It isn't given to them so that they can brag that they have the ability to learn foreign languages without studying or taking classes.
- It isn't given to them so they can make lots of money or ____.
- → Rather, it is a gift from God that allows them to build up the body of Christ and share what God has done.

We know that the Spirit is at work in us through our gifts whenever they are being used not just to build ourselves up, but to build up the body of Christ and love one another.

So what are some of the gifts in this place being used to build up this body of Christ or share God's love?

-Music, VBS volunteers, kitchen helpers, maintenance and repair, and I see it less because I see you most often at church, but I am sure, too that this is happening in your homes and at your workplaces as you love each other.

Those are all great examples.

Whenever you see those things, whether you are at church or at the grocery store, smile, and know that you see evidence of the Spirit of God blowing through both that place and through someone's heart.

One final place where we see the Spirit blowing is when the impossible is made possible, or things come to fruition that are beyond our wildest dreams.

For the disciples, it must have seemed impossible that the message should spread to the ends of the earth. But as it turns out, the Holy Spirit really did give them power to make disciples, because we later learn that that day 3,000 were added to their number. Today, I wouldn't be surprised if Christianity exists in every country of the world and actually has almost reached the ends of the earth.

But to those disciples, Jesus' promise must have seemed impossible.

And I see something similar happening here. I know that as a church you have been through some difficult times in recent years. In the past months, I have been listening to your stories, and people tell me often that during those difficult times, they wondered and worried what our church would look like on the other side of those struggles.

But here is what I see as I look around now:

- I see people sharing their gifts to build up the body of Christ.
- I see a church united in Christ and filled with the Spirit.
- I see people stepping up to the plate and realizing that they can contribute, and they can serve, and they can make a difference.

I hear and see delight, as you look around and realize that you have indeed made it, that you are stronger for it, and that the Spirit is in your midst.

In a few weeks, many of the youth will go on a trip to Alaska, and their theme verse is this, from Ephesians: "God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us."

In just these few short months, I already see his Spirit deeply and gently within us, accomplishing things that we may not even be able to imagine or guess or request in our wildest dreams.

So be on the lookout for the Spirit, maybe not with fire and violent winds, but breathing on us and showing us the way. Amen.