

The Spirit Still Works
A sermon for Pentecost
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Acts of the Apostles 2: 1-21

I believe this text is about unexpected changes brought on by the Spirit of God.

Unexpected changes in our lives: who ever expected we'd have a pandemic to live through? I mean, one week we were at the county building hearing about this disease and being told to use hand sanitizer, and the next week we were all at home, wearing masks. Who would have expected this?

Who would have expected that race relations would become so pointed in our time? Weren't we all getting along? Now we are told we are privileged, and we have to set that aside if we are understand. Who expected that?

Who would have expected a war in Eastern Europe to draw new countries into NATO? Who would have expected weekly shootings of innocent shoppers and schoolchildren? Yet again we are hearing calls for gun registration and reform, and something like 88% of the people in our land support this.

Is the Spirit of God active in these things? You better be careful how you answer, because if you say no, you might miss what the Spirit is doing. I believe the Spirit is active in whatever happens, good or bad, trying to lure us closer to the Father, hoping to show us a better way, a new way.

Some people believe, and many preachers will say, that the Spirit is not involved in things outside the walls of the church, that the Spirit is not there unless God is specifically and deliberately honored. Perhaps you agree with that. I don't think the Spirit is limited in that way. The Spirit speaks and will use whatever is being said to speak to us.

One time in seminary I was driving over to Hightstown, NJ, where Susan lived. I was struggling with something or other, and I was praying and thinking about it, whatever it was. A song came on the radio, Bob Seger's *Against the Wind*. I turned it up loud, and knowing that word in Hebrew and Greek for wind is the same as the word for Spirit, I began to listen with new ears. It seemed that God was saying to me, quit pushing against me! It was quite the experience!

Over the years, I have had several similar experiences: enough to tell me that the Spirit doesn't necessarily wait until we gather for worship to speak. The Spirit can use whatever is at hand to make the point, and often does.

You know that little voice that tells you do something, or not to do it, that you sometimes hear? That, we often say, is the voice of conscience, but really, it's the Spirit. The Spirit speaks, mostly softly, urging us, pointing us, nudging us, to go a certain way. Which means we have to listen to the voice, we have to learn to listen to it. And we have to become comfortable using the language of the Spirit.

Oh, there are those who say, who insist, that one must have a certain experience of the Spirit, in order to hear him, or know what he is up to. One time in college a bunch of us went to some mega-church to hear someone talk, or maybe it was a concert; anyway, the people in front of us were really friendly, until someone mentioned we were mostly Presbyterians and Methodists. After that, they turned away and didn't talk to us any more. When we put boundaries and limits on what the Spirit can do, we almost always go astray.

All of which leads us to our text. Here we have the disciples doing what Jesus told them to do: waiting for the Spirit. They have no idea what the Spirit will be like nor what it will do. They are just waiting. It is the day of Pentecost. This is one of the great harvest festivals of the Jews, and it is required of the faithful that they make the trip to Jerusalem. So the city is full of people, a bustling crowd.

They celebrate the taking in of the grain harvest at this festival. It is important to their economy and lifestyle. God gave the Hebrews the Law, which detailed this feast and others. They were told to celebrate it. Here the disciples receive the Spirit on this day, in a sort of parallel with the Hebrews receiving the Law. They wait.

Suddenly, without any warning, no trumpet blast or anything, they hear a wind. A mighty wind, like the wind in Genesis 1 which broods over the waters. There is no cloud, no weather outside. Just the wind. It blows through the house.

And it comes like fire, like a kind of fire that lands on each of them.

You may not believe this, but each year on the night before Easter, just at midnight, the Orthodox bishop of Jerusalem goes into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and mysteriously, a light appears and ignites his candle. He goes back out into the waiting crowd, and the light, the fire, jumps from one candle to the next, without any help. It is almost as though this fire is intelligent! People can hold the fire in their hands, for it doesn't burn. This is called the miracle of the Holy Fire: you can find it on YouTube if you don't believe me.

I think the Pentecost fire was something like that: a fire that jumped from one disciple to the next, that didn't burn them, but which filled them with power, with, well, FIRE!

When you combine wind and fire you have trouble. Look at the wildfires in California, for example. A fire that is miles away is suddenly right here, burning down the houses on the street. It is all people can do to get away with their lives!

When you combine the wind of the Spirit with the fire of the Spirit, you see the gospel spread in ways we can't really imagine! These disciples are suddenly fearless. These disciples never expected to be preaching fearlessly in other languages about Jesus being the Christ!

This was brought by the Spirit which empowered them and gave them the gumption to do this. Then they went on and did a lot of other things.

Why? How?

They weren't scared anymore of death. They weren't afraid of human enemies. The worst others could do was to kill them, and if they aren't scared of that — well, then what?

They weren't scared of death because they knew they had "died with Christ." They knew that they had new life in Christ, at their deaths, yes, but even now. And so death didn't terrify them anymore. If you get people who are not afraid of death, you have a powerful group. They can do mostly anything.

The story is told of a young Amish man who was objecting to some plan of the elders. The elders, for their part, were trying to calm down the enthusiasm this young man had. But he kept countering their objections. Finally they said, "if you do that the government will come in and arrest you and kill you." And the young man answered, "I have already died with Christ, so there is nothing they can do to me."

Well, for centuries the church has had a conflict between the enthusiasts and the institutionalists. The institutionalists usually win, as the enthusiasm wanes. But the Spirit is always there, trying to get our enthusiasm up, and trying to get our institutions to be more responsive. Let's not shut out the Spirit of God!

Come Holy Spirit, Come
Come as the wind and cleanse, Come as the fire and burn, Come as the Truth and reveal.
Convict me, Convert me, Consecrate me, until we are wholly yours!

Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.