

## Celebrate the Spirit

When I was in high school, our church youth group leader was a young man who was on fire for Christ. He talked about being baptized with the Holy Spirit; how when he prayed, he spoke in tongues – a spirit guided language that he didn't understand.

I'd been trying to do what God wanted me to do all my life. I was baptized with water in sixth grade. I renewed my commitment to following Jesus during a youth rally in high school. But I knew I had never experienced a baptism with the Spirit the way he described it. In fact, that type of losing control scared me and I wasn't sure I wanted it to happen. But I kept wondering, "Could I be the best Christian possible without this experience?"

One Wednesday evening, I summoned all my courage and asked the youth leader to pray for me to be baptized with the Spirit. He shared this request with the rest of the youth group and asked if anyone else wanted this too. Practically everyone in the room joined the circle. We held hands; he prayed; and I waited for something miraculous and earth-shattering to happen.

But nothing did. I felt the same way I had when I arrived that evening. I left disappointed. My experience was not like the one he had described. It was not like the one recorded in the second chapter of Acts.

However, I am convinced that the Spirit of God was working in my life before that day and has been working in my life every day since then as my faith has grown and changed and matured. Evidence of this is that I am living in Kansas and have been your pastor for almost twelve years. Even if I had never become a pastor, I know that the Spirit of God is living within me, inspiring me, empowering me.

Let's review the story about wind and fire, filling in a few of the details we didn't hear during the storytelling. Think for a moment about what happened prior to the event described in Acts 2.<sup>1</sup> After Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to his followers on multiple occasions. According to the story we heard last Sunday from the first chapter of Acts, Jesus appeared to the apostles during a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Holy Spirit who had been promised to them. This Spirit would give them the power they needed to tell everyone about Jesus – at home, in the nearby towns and villages, and in faraway countries. They would share the good news with all people everywhere.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, his followers did as he had told them. While they were waiting, it came time to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost, which happens 50 days after Passover. (This year, many churches will celebrate Pentecost on Sunday, May 23. But since we've just begun a worship series centered on the book of Acts, we decided to celebrate it early.) This festival marked the end of the wheat harvest. It also celebrated the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai which, of course, happened after the exodus. Because of the holiday, Jerusalem would have been full of devout Jews. There were pilgrim Jews visiting from other countries. There were immigrant Jews from other nations living in Jerusalem. It was an international festival of people speaking many languages.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon draws from Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year A*, Trinity Press International, 1992, pp. 293-298 and Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year A*, Abingdon Press, 2001, 201-202.

The longer version of today's storytelling divides rather neatly into four parts. In Acts 2:1-4, the story opens with a description of the day's events. There is a shattering noise accompanied by a spectacular vision. The sound like a tornado is accompanied by little flames of fire resting on each person. This dramatic moment of revelation reminds us of the astounding event the Jews were celebrating, the giving of the Ten Commandments recorded in Exodus 19 and 20.

In the second part of the story, verses 5-11, we find a detailed roster of those in attendance. It's a universal audience. Pilgrims from far away traveled to Jerusalem to join the residents of the city who themselves had originated from a wide variety of places. This gathering of people from many nations was a foretaste of future events. The Jewish people were familiar with descriptions of a final messianic ingathering. Both Isaiah and Micah describe people from all nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord, learning God's ways, receiving fair judgment, and learning to live in peace.<sup>2</sup>

In part three of our story, verses 12-36, we find a description of the response of the audience and a lengthy sermon delivered by Peter. The people in the crowd are amazed, astounded, perplexed, and confused. Some sneered, jeered, ridiculed, and mocked the speakers saying they were drunk. Peter begins his address with logic – it's too early for these people to be drunk. He quotes the prophet Joel and King David, connecting their words to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and to this strange Pentecost occurrence. Peter's contention is that these marvelous signs point to this event as the fulfillment of Joel's vision – a vision of what would happen near the end of time, during the last days of life on earth as they knew it. More importantly, these events are proof that Jesus is the Messiah – the one promised to them as their savior and redeemer.

The story concludes in verses 37-41 with people in the crowd asking what they should do. Peter responds, "Turn to God! Be baptized in Jesus' name. Then you will receive the Holy Spirit. God's promise is for you and your children, for those who are close, and for all who are far away." We now know that the promise isn't simply to the children of Israel, to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The words Paul wrote in his letter to the Roman Christians remind us that all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.<sup>3</sup>

What did all of this mean for those present in Jerusalem on what we now call the day of Pentecost? We know it wasn't yet the end of time as they likely thought. It is apparent that the disciples felt a new sense of power—power that changed them from quiet, hesitant believers to bold witnesses to the Resurrection. This power, they said, was like the power felt in a strong wind or in a blazing fire. Probably it wasn't the first time the disciples had felt the presence, or the power, of God's Spirit. But this time was different. This was the power that Jesus had promised them! This was the power that would give them the calling, the gift, and the strength to witness to God both in their own communities and to the very center of their world, to Rome itself.

This is one of the most important stories for those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus. This event is considered the birthday of the Christian church. Next week we'll read the rest of Acts 2 and talk about how the first community of believers related to each other.

So at least once a year – usually on Pentecost Sunday, but a bit earlier for us this year – we think about what the Spirit means to us. We remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit is a gift – it is sent, it is received, it 'rests' on God's people.

And we, or at least I, confess that this gift is often neglected in our study and theology. There are any number of reasons for our lack of attention to the third person of the Trinity. Perhaps chief among them is our fear of what we don't understand. There's an aspect of mystery to the Spirit. Scriptural metaphors for God or Jesus are most often relational and intimate. God is our

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-4

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:14-17

father, mother, protector, provider, creator. Jesus is our brother, teacher, shepherd, healer, redeemer. But metaphors for the Spirit are drawn from natural elements like flame, wind, cloud, water. These are impersonal forces that resist our control. Maybe that's why my timid, disappointed teen-age self was also relieved when nothing sensational or spectacular occurred at youth group on that Wednesday night many years ago.

We also may resist speaking of the Holy Spirit because we fear such conversation will expose or deepen theological divisions. Yet Scripture presents the Spirit as a gift, something to be celebrated rather than feared, something to be received with joy rather than reticence. Indeed, in Scripture we find that the Holy Spirit brings unity rather than division. At Pentecost, as the Spirit is poured out, it unifies believers across lines of gender, generation, race, and class.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church tells us more about this. In chapter twelve, he responds to persons who believe that everyone in the congregation should have the same gift. And, of course, each person says everyone else should have the same gift they have, thinking, "If I have it, it must be the most important one."

Paul responds by saying that the Spirit makes it possible to make an authentic Christian profession of faith. He points out that the Spirit is the source of the various gifts in the church. Diversity of gifts, services, and activities within the community of believers is the norm, not the exception. According to Paul, the Spirit is the unifying force within the diverse body of Christ.

And, perhaps most importantly, the Spirit works for the common good. The various gifts are used for a common purpose – the building up of the whole church. Each person should ask, "Does this attitude or activity edify the community of faith? Does it follow the example of Jesus and how he related to those around him?" Each talent, ministry, and job is valued. In the church it is not appropriate to boast about one contribution and disparage another. The Holy Spirit gives gifts not for individual use but for the common good. The power of the Holy Spirit in our midst serves to strengthen rather than divide the believing community.

A challenge for each particular congregation is to think about how they are working for the common good of the entire body of Christ, the larger Christian community. We, the Salina Mennonite Church, must continue to ask ourselves several questions: Why are we located in this place at this time? What gifts do we as a congregation contribute to the neighborhood, the community, and the church as a whole? These questions aren't only for me or for the church board or for someone else. They are for all of us to consider. We may not understand exactly who the Spirit is or how the Spirit works, but I'm convinced that the Spirit helps us to answer those questions and enables us to do the work we are called to do.

Near the end of 2019, we spent a day envisioning our future. Three themes that emerged from brainstorming about our purpose as a congregation were: (1) to stay alive and remain vibrant, (2) to strengthen and care for internal and external relationships, and (3) to care for the community. Proposals from brainstorming groups included: (1) making the church visible to those outside these walls, (2) discerning local needs and planning to support them, ex. immigration and LGBTQ inclusion, (3) trying different ways of using technology in worship, and (4) "blowing" the budget on bigger projects. Not all of these had equal support. I'm condensing some items and leaving others out. But this reminds us of what we talked about a year and a half ago.

Of course, we never expected the turns that 2020 would take. We encountered and adapted to situations that didn't seem possible when we created these lists. (I have to chuckle about the idea of trying new technology in worship. That one was forced on us. We'll continue to use what we've learned even when we return to more of us gathering in-person.) While our energy was diverted, we didn't forget our discussion and our vision. Ideas that were simmering during the past year are now moving forward. Plans to increase our visibility, widen our welcome, and improve our

building and grounds are listed in the bulletin. Each of us can contribute our time, talent, and energy to the project(s) for which we are most suited.

I'll end my remarks today with a story – one I wrote ten years ago and revised a bit for today. In Salina, we have an annual event that might help us to understand what it was like to be in Jerusalem during the Jewish festival described Acts 2. We missed out on it last year and have to wait until September for it this year. I'm calling this story *Pentecost: The River Festival Edition*. (Disclaimer: names of musical groups have not been updated. They were current when I wrote the story in 2011.

*On the second weekend in June, there were tens of thousands of devout music and art lovers traveling to Salina from every county in Kansas, from neighboring states, and from points beyond. There were artists from Georgia, Illinois, New Mexico, and Washington. There were musicians from Boulder, Wichita, Nashville, Charlottesville, and even Toronto. There were adults who had come every year for nearly 45 years; teen-agers who had come every year of their lives; and babies who were there for the first time. Everyone set up their chairs, spread their blankets, looked for their favorite food vendors, perused their program booklets, and greeted their friends, some of whom they hadn't seen since last year's festival.*

*Members of the Salina Mennonite Church gathered by the Kenwood Park Footbridge as they had been instructed, wondering what was in store for them that day. Suddenly there was a rush of wind (not too unusual for Kansas). Little bolts of lightning struck each person, knocking them to the ground but amazingly not injuring any of them.*

*All of them suddenly had the urge to do things they had never done before. The Stuckey Family picked up violins and joined the Anasazi String Quartet. The Smuckers seamlessly joined in the harmonies of the Good Lovelies. The Van Tassels found instruments and added their talents to the John Jorgenson Quintet. August, Ariel, and Aaron located drumsticks and contributed to the Nagata Shachu without missing a beat. The Kathrineberg women played saxophone, flute, and guitar with the Joseph Vincelli Group. The Funks joined the country rock stylings of Buffalo Rome. Other members of the congregation scattered among the tents and began painting, carving, throwing pots, making jewelry, and blowing glass with the artists.*

*Everyone around them was amazed and perplexed by the talents these people were suddenly displaying. Some were suspicious and said, "I bet they've been practicing for years in secret and decided to wait until today to show us their new talents." But each member of the congregation said to those around them, "It's hard to explain exactly what happened. I felt the Spirit of God fill my body, my soul, my mind, and my heart. Now I can do things I could never do before. I praise God for what has happened and I invite each one of you to experience it too."*

It could happen, couldn't it? On this day when we remember Pentecost, may we set aside our fears and embrace the Spirit's presence. Like those believers in Acts, may we be empowered to declare the wonders of God and do things we never imagined we could do.