

Wind and Fire
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Wind and Fire
Series: The Space in Which He Calls Us to Follow
Acts 2:1-21

“When the day of Pentecost came...”

I submit to you that the church of Jesus Christ will have really understood the Gospel of Jesus Christ when Pentecost becomes as big a celebration as Easter and Christmas. For Pentecost is an event of the same order of magnitude as Easter and Christmas. “When the day of Pentecost came...”

In the first century, Pentecost was one of three major festivals the people of Israel celebrated. Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Pentecost began as an agricultural feast, celebrating the first fruits of the spring crop. The feast is, therefore, also called “First fruits”, “the Feast of Harvest of the first fruits of the labour” (Deuteronomy 16:10) It was celebrated 50 days after Passover. Hence Pente-cost. Pente – bitieh. 50 days after Passover; 50 days after the feast that celebrates God liberating His people from oppression and slavery.

When the day of Pentecost came... By the first century Pentecost also celebrated the giving of the Law; the giving of the Ten Commandments. The feast celebrated the wonderful fact that the creator of all things does not leave humanity to try to figure out how to live in a broken world. The Creator speaks and reveals what “the good life” looks like.

When the day of Pentecost came”

50 days after Jesus’ resurrection. 50 days after God’s great victory over the forces that keep humanity from living fully human, fully alive. 50 days after overcoming the powers of sin and evil and death.

When the day of Pentecost came the Spirit of God came! “and suddenly”, says Luke the author of the Pentecost story. “Suddenly there came from heaven...” “And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a mighty rushing wind... and there appeared to them tongues as of fire” And the world has never been the same!

We will have truly begun to understand to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ, when Pentecost becomes as big a celebration as Easter and Christmas. For like Christmas, Pentecost also celebrates the coming of God into the world! On the first Christmas, the Living God came to live among us. On the first Pentecost, the Living

god came to live within us. And like Christmas, Pentecost also celebrates the fulfillment of promise. On the first Christmas, God sent the promised Redeemer, Jesus our Immanuel. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised: "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given". (Isaiah 9:6) On the first Pentecost God sent the promised Paraclete, the Comforter, the "one-called-in – alongside". Through the prophet Isaiah God promised: "I will pour my Spirit upon your descendents and my blessing on your offspring". (44:2-3) Through the prophet Ezekiel God promised: "I will not hide my face any more from them, when I pour my Spirit upon the house of Israel". A number of times Jesus refers to the Spirit as "the promise of the Father". On Easter "I am sending the promise of my father upon you" (Luke 24:49) 40 days after Easter "Wait for the promise of the Father", He told the first disciples, "which you have heard from Me. John baptized you in and with water, but you shall be baptized in and with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5) As the apostle Peter puts it in his Pentecost Day sermon: "Having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he (Jesus) has poured out this which you see and hear" (Acts 2:33).

So, like Christmas, Pentecost is also the fulfillment of promise. Which is why Peter begins his Pentecost Day sermon, "this is that"; this is that which was spoken of..." "This is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel, "It shall be in the last days," says God, "that I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17) Not just you Israel! But upon all peoples!

And we will have truly begun to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ when Pentecost becomes as big a celebration as Christmas. Christmas – God sends His Son to become one of us, to be God with us. Pentecost – God sends His Spirit to take up permanent residence, to be God in us. On Pentecost, the One who was born in a stable, crucified between two thieves on a cross, raised from a borrowed grave, lifted up to the highest status in the universe pours out on His followers the Very Life of God! And says Luke, there was wind and fire. "Suddenly," says Luke. "Suddenly, there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind." And it "filled" the house where the disciples were gathered. "It filled the whole house". As God had done in the past when His Glory filled the Tabernacles in the wilderness and the Temple of Jerusalem.

"Suddenly", says Luke. "Suddenly there appeared to them tongues as of fire". "Resting on each of them" Burning but not destroying like the day the Living God met Moses in the desert in a bush ablaze in fire yet not being destroyed.

Wind and fire. Wind and fire. Throughout the history of God's dealing with humanity these two phenomena have constantly marked the presence and activity of the Living God.

Psalm 50, verses 1-3.

1 The Mighty One, God, the LORD,
speaks and summons the earth

from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.

2 From Zion, perfect in beauty,
God shines forth.

3 Our God comes and will not be silent;
a fire devours before him,
and around him a tempest rages”

Wind and fire. On the day of Pentecost when the Living God came to live in us, there was what seemed to be wind and fire.

“from heaven”, says Luke. That is, from outside the created order, from outside s. “From heaven”. That is, human beings did not create the phenomena. No committee met to plan and orchestrate Pentecost. No committee met to plan and orchestrate Christmas or Easter either. Pentecost, like Christmas, is all about the in-breaking of the Transcendent. “suddenly”. “From heaven”.

And there was what seemed to be wind and fire.

Why does the Spirit manifest Himself in these two ways? And what are the implications for us right now? Reflect with me on each of the images.

Wind. “suddenly a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting.” We should not be surprised that the Holy Spirit is manifested in this way. For both the Hebrew and the Greek word Spirit means ‘breath’ or ‘wind’. The Greek word is ‘pneuma’ carried into the English language in words like pneumatic and pneumonia. The Hebrew word is ‘ruach’. It is one of those words which mimics the sound of what it describes (onomatopoeia) RUACH. Breath. Wind.

What does the image tell us about the coming of the Paraclete to the church and the city?

- 1) Wind refreshes. Especially on a hot and humid day, there is nothing like a breeze: moving stagnant air around and invigorating weary bodies. So too the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit moves the whole atmosphere changes Gloom is lifted. The sense of Suffocation is broken. There is a new aroma, the aroma of fresh life.
- 2) Wind also disturbs. The wind blows, kicking up dust and dirt. Sometimes blowing so hard it knocks down and up-roots.

So to the Holy Spirit. The ruach comes and things are stirred up, sometimes overturned. Structures and tradition which no longer support spiritual life are swept aside. Which explains why when we pray for spiritual reward in our lives or in the church we often enter a period of what feels like upheaval. The renewing Spirit is

moving; but first unsettling what is no longer working, making room for God's new work. Is this not what is happening to the church in the Western world right now? Yes, much of the upheaval is due to the work of the Spirit shaking us out of patterns that no longer work. Wind disturbs.

- 3) Wind also cleanses. After kicking up the dirt the wind blows it away. So, too the Holy spirit, the Ruach comes to blow out the cobwebs and dust (Lloyd Ogilvie) the Spirit comes to sweep the house clean, making it a more fit dwelling place for the Divine Glory.
- 4) But that which stands out most about wind is its freedom: the wind cannot be controlled. Used, yes. Controlled, no. That is why the disciples were so startled when Jesus stills the violent wind on the Sea of Galilee: "Who then is this that even the wind obeys Him?" (Mark 4:41) No mere human being can exercise such control over the mysterious wind. Some like to call Pentecost the birthday of the Church. On its birthday a sound like the rushing of mighty wind came down from heaven. "Suddenly". "Suddenly". "Suddenly".

Right from the beginning the Church is being told that we will never be able to get the Spirit of God under our control.

The Paraclete is the Sovereign God who moves in sovereign freedom. Jesus told Nicodemus, speaking of the life-giving work of the Spirit, "the wind (pneuma) blows where it will, and you hear its sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going". (John 3:8) The Holy Spirit Who comes to live alongside and within the people of God cannot be controlled by the people of God. We try to control, do we not? We limit the workings of the Spirit to our timetables and to our ways of doing things. "Suddenly", says Luke. Suddenly. The Spirit blows where and when and how the Spirit wills.

Canon Michael Green of the Church of England, reminds us that in speaking of the Spirit-as-Wind, the Biblical authors are "stressing that the ??? has come into our midst, and we can neither organize nor domesticate Him". (I Believe in the Holy Spirit, pg 19)

Green goes on: "I believe we have to take this aspect of the Spirit very seriously today. We have grown used to expecting the Spirit of God to speak in a gentle whisper, not a roaring wind. We have sought Him in the promptings of our hearts or the resolutions of our committees. We are in danger of forgetting that it is God we are talking about the God who created us, the God Who sustains us and has sovereign rights over us. This God can and does break in to human life, and sometimes He does it through the violent, the unexpected, the alien"(page 20)

This is why Anne Dillard, not so jokingly, suggests that on Sunday mornings, along with the order of worship the ushers should also hand out crash helmets and life preservers, just in case the Holy one were to choose to be to us all that the Holy One is.

we cannot organize nor domesticate the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Like the wind, the Ruach is beyond our control. You can see then why one of the most important, if not the most important, disciplines of the Christian life is waiting. Waiting for the Divine Wind to blow.

Let me ask you a question. What is the last command Jesus gave His disciples before ascending to the throne? Most people will answer: "Go, make disciples of all the nations" (Mark 28:19) Right? But the command is not the last; it is the second to the last. The last command is 'wait'. Luke 24:49 "stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high". Acts 1:4 "wait for what the Father promised." You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you". (1:8) Is it possible that we are not more effective in discipling the nations because we have not waited long enough? So often we struggle and strive in our own strength in places we have not yet been lead to go. Wait.

Pentecost happened when the disciples were waiting.

Now, waiting for the wind is not a passive act. It requires the highest of human faculties. It requires alertness, discernment, concentration, readiness. We see this expectant waiting in the eagle. Early in the morning the eagle mounts the limb of a tall tree or the ledge of a high rock. Its wings are tucked in close to its body. It looks passive but it is anything but! It is concentrating; testing the thermal currents rising from the ground below. It waits and waits and waits until at the right moment it simply spreads its wings and glides on the wind. No frantic flapping of its wings it just spreads them and rises by the power of the thermals.

God says to us through the prophet Isaiah:

"Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength, they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary." (40:31).

Do you, like me, ever feel like a pelican or turkey – trying to mount up by flapping our wings and never really flying? "Wait" says Jesus. Wait for the thermals, wait for the updrafts of the sovereign Wind of God. Tuck in the wings and concentrate. Once in a while test the currents, slowly spread the wings. If not ready pull the wings back in when ready, simply spread the wings and fly.

The crucial question we need to keep asking as individuals and as a church is this: "where is the wind blowing? Where are God's thermal currents moving? Right now? When we live and work from this perspective we discover what Michael Cassidy of South Africa discovered: that we are no longer working for God, but with god" (Bursting the Wineskins, pg 243)

Suddenly a sound like a mighty rushing wind came from heaven and 120 people were invigorated for ministry.

And they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and rested on each of them”

Fire. We should not be surprised that the Holy Spirit is manifested in this way given that word Holy. Again and again through history the presence and activity of the Holy One has been marked by fire. God called to Moses from within the burning bush. (ex 3:2) God led the people of Israel across the desert with a pillar of fire. When God gave the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, the text says the mountain was “all in smoke because Yahweh descended upon it in fire.” When God comes to the prophet Ezekiel in what Ezekiel calls “a storm wind”. God’s glory was manifested as fire” (1:4,13)

Fire. What does this image tell us about the coming of the Paraclete to the church and the city?

1) Fire illuminates. Fire helps us see what is going on in the darkness. The light of the fire helps us see the ??? of those in the in ??? with us. The light of the fire helps us see the path and the obstacles, which lie across it.

So too the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes and illuminates. After all Jesus calls the Spirit “the Spirit of Truth” (John 14:17; 15:26), Who opens up “the really real”.

The Fire of God helps s see ourselves as God sees us and to see the world as God sees it. The Spirit comes to shine in the dark places of our lives; revealing the hidden things; not to embarrass but to heal.

2) Fire also warms. It takes the chill out of the air. It melts the coldness in the room. So too the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes and warms human hearts melting the coldness of fear and chill of doubt igniting new affections for the Living god. The Spirit melts our natural resistance to the Lordship of Jesus and warms our wills to seek fist His Kingdom.

The Spirit melts through the walls that separate the human family, burning away the suspicion and bitterness that divides us. The Fire of God ignites a new kind of love where the Spirit of the Lord is there is warmth – for Jesus and for those for whom He died.

3) Fire also purifies. Fire especially purifies precious metals. In the process it consumes but the goal is purification. So too, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes and the process of holification begins. Jesus says, mixing metaphors, “everyone shall be salted with fire” (Mark 9:49)

Right from the beginning the church is being told what we are in for. The Fire of God is going to burn away all impurity. The Fire intends to make us like the ??? One.

“Our God” says the writer of the book of Hebrews “is a consuming fire”. (12;29) And as Tim Stafford observes, the fire will burn until it is out of fuel. Until all that is left is the shining metal reflecting the Glory of God. (Knowing the Face of God, pg 131/151)

Amy Carmichael have herself to the neglected children of India. One day she took some orphan kids to watch a goldsmith refine gold. At one point the goldsmith lifted a piece of gold out of the fire with a pair of tongs, let it cool and then rubbed it between his fingers. He was not satisfied. So he put the piece of gold back in the fire – and blew the fire hotter!! The children asked “how do you know when the gold is refined?” The goldsmith replied “when I can see my face in it”.

The Spirit of the Living Good burns in us until the face of Jesus can be in us. The burning may hurt. . . but only for awhile. For soon we begin to glow with the brilliant fire of Divine love (ibid, pg 193) Which teaches us one more think about fire.

5) Fire spreads especially when the wind blows. Indeed, one of the chief qualities of fire is its capacity to set something else on fire (Elton Trueblood). So too the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes sets people on fire and uses them to set others on fire. On the first Pentecost the fire fell on 120 people gathering in the Upper room. And by the end of the day 3000 more were on fire! 3000 believers I one day!

As the old song goes “it only takes a spark to get a fire going; and soon all those around can warm up to its glowing. That’s how it is with God’s love, once you’ve experienced it. Its fresh like spring. You want to sing. You want to pass it on.”

Dr Geddes MacGregor of the University of Southern California writes: “The Spirit lights an inextinguishable fire in the depths of our being. When that fire catches at the core of our being, it sets us ablaze with the love of God, and as we pass among other men and women, we transmit sparks of that fire that they may likewise catch in them and so inflame them.” (The Nicene Creed, pg 111)

It would seem then that the Holy Spirit has a very simple evangelistic strategy. The Spirit lights fires and then blows on them. For fire – by its very nature – spreads and sets something also on fire.

When, therefore, the Church loses its desire and energy to share the good news the solution is not to exhort “get out there folks”. The solution is to exhort “sisters and brothers let the fire burn.”

Again, Jesus last command is not ‘go’ but ‘wait’. “Wait for what the Father promised. ..you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be My witness in all the earth”. Being witnesses is not a command; it is a promise. When the Fire of God fall we cannot help but “transmit sparks”.

Which is what happened at Pentecost. Luke tells us that there were present that day people from all over the world. "Parthians, Medes, Elamites", people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Egypt, Rome". And wonder of wonders they were all hearing the good news in their own tongues in their own languages. The Jewish disciples of Jesus were speaking in their own tongues in Hebrew or Aramaic. Yet people from all over the world were hearing the good news in their own languages!

What is Luke wanting us to know about Pentecost? Pentecost is the great reversal! It is the great reversal of the judgment at the tower of Babel. Long ago, as the story goes, the people of the earth banded together in rebellion against God and tried to build a new civilization without God. They tried to build a tower "whose top would reach heaven" say the text. Genesis 11:4.

God, knowing that this rebellion would only lead to further ruin, confused their languages so that humanity would not succeed in building a civilization around a false centre.

At Pentecost, God, as it were, un-confused human language. For now. . . in Jesus. . . humanity can build a new civilization around the true centre. For 50 days before the true centre of life energized from the grave. 50 days before the true centre overcame the destructive powers of sin and evil and death, and is now the One in Whom humanity can finally be fully human.

"When the days of Pentecost came" Pentecost is the fulfillment of promise. Like Christmas, Pentecost is the fulfillment of promise. "I will pour My Spirit on all flesh." And suddenly a sound like a mighty rushing wind filling the whole house. And what seemed like tongues of fire resting on them. Enabling disciples of Jesus to move out into the city joyfully proclaiming the mighty deeds of God.

On this Pentecost Sunday, would you like new, like a fresh in-breaking of the Wind and Fire of God?

The Spirit has come and does not leave us. But we can lose touch with Him: we grieve Him, we quench Him, we ignore Him, we forget Him.

So would you, like me, like to see the Risen and Exalted Jesus blow His wind across the face of His Church, and cause the Fire of His love to fall in every part of the city?

In many Christian churches today, believers will be praying the simple prayer, "Come, Holy Spirit, Come." Will you pray too? Simply repeat after me. Come, Holy Spirit Come.

Come as Holy Wind and lift me. Come as Holy Fire and burn me. Come as Holy Love and hold me. Come as Holy light and lead me. Come as Holy Life and fill me. Breathe on me breath of God.

