

“Pentecost”

Acts 2:1-13 (NRSV)

What is your favourite recollection of **fireworks**? Perhaps the special display during the closing days of Expo 86 is still in your mind. Or some particular July 1st Canada Day celebration stands out as a special memory. I’ll never forget the special memory of a July 4th demonstration of fireworks that my family and I saw from the sweeping arches of the bridge over the Siuslaw River in Florence, Oregon when our children were young. The best show was not the fireworks themselves, but **the effect of them on our children’s faces**. Their repeated wide-eyed abandon and expression of sheer joy at the brilliant bursts of multi-coloured light that burst and unfolded above them like huge pinwheels in the black sky was what touched me the most.

While the departing luminous cloud at the ascension of Jesus Christ must have been an extraordinary sight, even more remarkable were **the apostles’ countenances**: “While he was going ... they were gazing up toward heaven....” (Acts 1:10). Imagine **the rapture on their faces** as they looked intently upward until the cloud was only a spark in their eyes and the angels told them to get moving. Those **uplifted eyes** set the tone for the next ten days that followed as they looked for Christ’s return via the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and a new influx of spiritual power. They really did believe that Christ was going to send the Spirit as he had repeatedly previously promised (Jn. 14:16-20, 25-28a; 15:26-27; 16:4-16, 22-24; 20:22). There was no doubt. No wavering.

Also, during that ten-day wait between the Ascension and Pentecost they became increasingly aware of **their need for a glimpse of him and their need to be filled**. During Christ’s life they’d known his exhilarating presence. Even during the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension they’d repeatedly been blessed by his unexpected visits. But during these last ten days the disciples undoubtedly felt empty. They were more than ever aware of the importance of their Saviour’s presence -- now he was truly gone. The Master’s words to them in the Upper Room before his crucifixion, “... apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5b) were forever ringing in their ears and embedded in their consciousness. Yet their profound emptiness, as trying as it was, made them ready for Pentecost!

What happened to the apostolic band when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost? **What happens to us** when the Holy Spirit fills us and how can we prepare for his coming?

As we look at what happened **to, in and through** these apostle-disciples we may see how God can work **with, in and through** us as well.

1. What happened **to** the apostles at Pentecost? (Acts 1:1-4).

Verse 1 tells us “the **day** of Pentecost had come.” This was **fifty days after Passover**. The Jewish festival of Passover occurred in mid-April, so Pentecost was at the beginning of June. It was **the best attended of all the festivals** because travelling conditions were at their best. Further, **there never was a more cosmopolitan gathering** in Jerusalem than this one. People had come to the city from all over the country and even beyond. It was a perfect time for the descent of the Holy Spirit of God.

There was another appropriate aspect to this moment to note as well. Pentecost was originally designated in the Old Testament as **a harvest festival, a “feast of first-fruits.”** It was the first of several harvests in an abundant land. And it was marked by special offerings of the first and the best of the wheat, including freshly baked loaves of bread, and also of the lambs and goats to God (Lev. 23:15-22). Thus, as a day marking thanksgiving for all God’s generous gifts, observed by the return of the first-fruits of the harvest, Pentecost was eminently appropriate for the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, and the conversion of 3,000 souls, first-fruits of an even greater harvest.

It was also a fitting day in another way, because by the time of Christ, Pentecost was considered to be **the anniversary of the giving of the Law** to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. This provided God a perfect opportunity to contrast **the giving of the Law** with **the giving of the Spirit**. Paul, the apostle, was to later summarize this contrast beautifully in the opening words of the eighth chapter of his Letter to the Romans: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death” (8:1, 2).

So **what happened** on that very special day?

As the apostles’ heads were bowed in expectant prayer, **a breeze** began to move across them, and then it was **more than a breeze**. Literally, “an echoing sound as of **a mighty wind** borne violently” -- like the winds of a hurricane -- roared through the Upper Room (2:2). A **fiery presence** was also in their midst, and as the text indicates, it suddenly divided into separate flame-like **tongues of fire** that danced, individually, over the heads of those present (2:3). Fire had always meant the

presence of God. Through John the Baptist, God had promised Jesus would eventually bring “a baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk. 3:16; Matt. 3:11), and now it was here. They were **filled** with the Holy Spirit (2:4a), and in an electrifying instant, began to speak in other languages, “as the Spirit gave them ability” (2:4b).

The event may seem **rather unusual, fantastic and mysterious** to us, with its wind and fire, and its supernatural utterances, I’ll grant you. But there were good, biblical reasons for it to happen in this way.

There is a splendid moment in the movie Jurassic Park when world-class paleontologist, **Allen Grant**, who has devoted his life to the study of dinosaurs, suddenly comes face-to-face with the real, live historic creatures. He falls to the ground, dumbstruck. The reason is obvious. It’s one thing to piece together an informed but imperfect image of dinosaurs by picking through fossils and bones. But to encounter an actual dinosaur -- well, there can be no comparison. It’s the same thing with God’s Holy Spirit. For many people spirituality amounts to picking through the artifacts of faith that survive from long ago and far away. In that long ago, bygone era, human beings saw God, heard his voice, and experienced his awesome, at times, terrible power. But that was then. Today, these kinds of gripping encounters with God -- a God who isn’t an illusion, but Someone real, Someone you could see, touch and feel -- well, there can be no comparison. The apostles encountered the real Holy Spirit.

The Hebrew and the Greek words for “**wind**” are both used for God’s Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the wind of God is reported to have swept over the beginnings of creation (Gen. 1:2b). And the prophet **Ezekiel** used the word to describe the wind of God moving over a valley of dry bones (representing a spiritually dead nation). There was thunder (NASB margin), and the clattering of bones as they came together “bone to bone.” Then, just as suddenly came the wonderfully macabre spectacle of sinews and flesh growing on these bones, and finally skin, as in Ezekiel’s words, the Spirit responded to God’s command: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live ... [and] they came to life and stood up on their feet -- a vast army” (37:9-10).

So, too, in the New Testament at **Penetecost**, it was reported that the reviving winds of God’s Spirit came upon the disciple-apostles with incredible spiritual life and power. The apostles now had God’s life-giving Spirit in a more intimate and powerful way than they’d ever known -- than anyone had ever known.

First “wind,” **then “fire.”**

Fire is also a symbol of **God’s presence** throughout the Bible, beginning with Moses

and the burning bush (Exod. 3:2-4), continuing with the “pillar of cloud and fire” that led the people of Israel corporately, by day and night, throughout their journey and wilderness wanderings (Exod. 13:21; 33:9; Ps. 99:7), culminating in the consuming fire they encountered as God gave them the Law on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:17). The fire at Pentecost also indicated God’s presence, indicating that God had not left or forsaken them.

However, a new significance came when the fire divided into flames dancing over the individual heads of the apostles. The Spirit now rested upon each believer individually. Although we must not forget that God works with his people corporately, the emphasis from Pentecost onwards is on the personal relationship of God to each believer through his Holy Spirit. The outer and inner individual “pillars” of fire -- seen or unseen -- over each of our heads offers to burn away each of our impurities and bring us to a sense of God’s presence.

It’s no surprise, therefore, that **Blaise Pascal**, the great seventeenth French mathematician and philosopher described his faith in a similar manner: “Fire. God, not of the philosophers and scholars, but the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. The God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.” He had this saying written upon a piece of cloth and sewn within the coat he wore every day. It wasn’t something he trumpeted. But he knew it to be profoundly true. The piece of cloth was discovered among his effects after he died.

First “wind,” then “fire,” **then divinely empowered utterance**. In the Old Testament, inspired speech was regularly associated with the Spirit’s coming to God’s servants. Pentecost was **the** day par excellence of bold, Spirit-inspired speech. To any observant Jewish believer it was easy to see the Holy Spirit had come.

When God’s Spirit comes to God’s people, he brings **“wind” and “fire” and the ability to speak to others of what God has done**.

I’ll never forget the story of **one of my people** at St. Giles’ Presbyterian Church in Prince George who came into a deeper understanding of God’s love for him and of God’s power in his life. Before, he was a rather tongue-tied dentist, doing his dentistry competently, I’m sure, but unable to speak with anyone about his faith. But there came a time in his life when he opened himself more to God’s Spirit and found he had a unique story to tell of how God has blessed his life. It changed him wonderfully, and he became a productive elder in the congregation.

How did the disciple-apostles feel when the heavens began to roar so loudly the

sound attracted a vast multitude from all the corners of the city of Jerusalem? Surely, there might have been some involuntary gasps or cries of surprise in that Upper Room. What was it like when the flames began flashing over their heads, like some strange **St. Elmo's fire**, and they began speaking languages they didn't know? (By the way, these were real languages, not some mumbo-jumbo.) Some began to speak in perfect Roman Latin, others in an authentic Phrygian dialect. The burning expectancy of the last fifty days was suddenly fulfilled; the persistent emptiness was suddenly gone.

So far, I've talked about what happened **to** the apostles. Now, let me linger a little bit longer on verse 4, and the languages they spoke.

2. What happened **within** the apostles at Pentecost? (Acts 2:4; Eph. 5:18-21).

Amazingly, the apostles were immediately able to speak in other languages, and they did it so well that people understood them. No long hours of listening to arduous language lessons. They were definitely not drunk in the ordinary sense of the word. Alcohol was not what set their tongues loose. God did it. Each one touched by the Holy Spirit was able to speak a language that connected with someone else.

Gary Smalley has a very useful book called The Five Love Languages (1992). (It's in our Church Library, and some ideas in it were used for "The Marriage Course" led by Guy and Lori a few years ago) Smalley writes about how we all have different ways of expressing or receiving love. There is probably one way that really speaks to us, or really connects for us. These "languages" include words spoken, time spent, actions shown, touch offered and gifts given. I believe that when the Holy Spirit came down on these apostles they found they knew exactly how to express God's love; they found that they were really able to connect with all kinds of people in all kinds of different languages.

The apostle **Paul** gives us some other ideas of what might have happened on the Day of Pentecost when he referred to what it means to be "filled with the Spirit" in a section of his Letter to the Ephesians. [Read Ephesians 5:18-21 NRSV.] These "other languages were given for the purpose of **useful and up-lifting communication**. These Spirit-filled believers didn't just blather on about anything with others in some kind of super-spiritual language that might be called "speaking in tongues" by some Christians. Their "speaking in other languages" was no one-day wonder.

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians suggests they went and spoke to one another with the

melody of **a song to the Lord in their heart**, with “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19). On Pentecost, and in the following days, through the work of the Holy Spirit, these believers shared the secret that God had not left them, indeed, that he was with them in a powerful, new way. They’d discovered a depth of communication among each other, and with others, they hadn’t known before.

There was also **joyful thanksgiving** in their communication. They sang and spoke, “giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20). Their inner music often erupted in voiced thanksgiving.

I also want you to note that although the Holy Spirit had influenced each of them personally, there was **mutual subjection** to one another. No one went off on their own spiritual trip. As Paul wrote, “Be subject to one another, out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). The gift of the Holy Spirit doesn’t make lone ranger Christians out of those who receive him. **God’s Holy Spirit brings people who respond to him together**. The disciples’ earlier concerns were more like who was going to get the chair next to Jesus in the kingdom. Jesus had to wash their feet because they refused to serve each other. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, they became able to submit to one another.

What a transformation this was! Notice and remember that in all the emotion and ecstasy of Pentecost, **a genuine spiritual transformation was taking place**, deep down inside, and then it flowed out to others.

I realize there was only one Pentecost historically, but the benefits of the filling remain, and they are wonderful -- a communicative spirit, a joyful and thankful spirit, and a mutually committed, yielding and serving spirit.

Some have suggested what happened to, in and through the disciple-apostles on that day in Pentecost eventually developed into what **John MacArthur** termed “the Corinthian catastrophe.” If you study chapters 12-14 of the first Corinthian correspondence, you will see there is some truth to this assertion. The filling of the Holy Spirit can run amuck. But it didn’t start out that way, or need to have gone in that direction. Remember Paul’s great chapter about Christian love in the middle of these three chapters. What happened at Pentecost was designed to get the Christian Church going, and to give it sufficient power to keep on going for as long as it took.

3. What happened **through** the apostles at Pentecost? (Acts 2:5-13).

The rushing wind and flames of fire brought together a great crowd, and the

disciple-apostles stepped forth from the Upper Room and began to proclaim the gospel in the languages of the day (2:5-6, 8-11). And, we are told, the hearers were “amazed and astonished” because they saw and heard these “Galileans” -- these country bumpkins, is the implication -- **begin to speak** like they’d never seen them or heard them before (2:7).

Some thought the disciple-apostles’ newfound confidence and competence had come from **natural causes**. So they scoffed and ridiculed them. They were like the hard-headed, rather cynical moderns among us who think only in natural terms and categories. They couldn’t understand that there might be some totally unexplainable way in which God’s Holy Spirit works to empower people. So they said the apostles had had too much “new wine” (2:13). But, as we’re told, it was only “nine o’clock in the morning” (2:15) and, the bars weren’t even open!

But **there were others who got the message**. God was at work, in these disciples-apostles, in the world, and in their own responsive, believing hearts. These honest hearers sought further answers to their questions, and wonderfully, as the chapter goes on to record, some 3,000 believed that day (2:41), and found that they were “added” to the church as soon as they discovered that they were in the process of “being saved” (2:47b).

What does this mean? It means that **the Holy Spirit brings new life to those who believe in Jesus Christ**, and with that life comes **a continuing power** to those who are continually filled. It means **wind in our sails and fire in our lives**, initially burning away the chaff, and then flaming warmly, welcomingly out to those around us. It means **the truth of God going forth from us** in ways we would never have imagined or dreamed. -- the divine utterance of God through us. It means helpful communication (some of us will study languages to do this better), thankful lives, and mutual submission.

What does this require of us? Acknowledging our emptiness, and our need to be filled. Being willing to let God’s Holy Spirit come alongside, which is his very nature, to bring his power surging through us, **like a set of jumper cables** which is so helpful when the winter’s cold has depleted our car’s battery power, and the car just won’t start. God help us to allow the Holy Spirit to help us. God help us invite the Holy Spirit to fill us today and every day.

Amen

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