

The Church Is on Fire  
Acts 2:1-21  
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Kory Wilcoxson

Did you know that today is one of the most important days in the Christian year? It should be celebrated as a holy day, from which we get our word “holiday,” but unfortunately it takes a back seat because it’s not as marketable as Christmas and Easter. After all, what do you say today? Merry Pentecost? At Easter we say, “He is risen!” So today should we say, “May a tongue of fire land on your head!” I’m guessing you didn’t put up your Pentecost tree and the kids aren’t waiting for a visit from the Pentecost bunny.

And yet, Pentecost is a defining day in the history of the church. It marks the moment when the disciples are empowered to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. After all, this is considered the church’s birthday! I think the reason we don’t give Pentecost more prominence is that its central actor is the Holy Spirit, and we just don’t really know what to do with that. At Christmas we have a little baby, at Easter we have a risen Jesus and at Pentecost, we have...an unseen, unpredictable, indefinable Spirit. And, honestly, that scares us. You know, it’s only two letters from “Pentecost” to “Pentecostal.”

This fear is embodied for me by an experience I had growing up. As a youngster I was invited to a local independent church by a friend of mine. I found out later the church had a reputation for being “weird,” but I didn’t know any better at the time. I remember the church was nothing like I had seen before. Its main worship space was not a sanctuary but a big auditorium. The music was very un-church-like and all the words to the songs were projected on a screen. But what was really interesting to me was how the people acted. They danced and threw their hands in the air like they were doing the Holy Hokey Pokey. I remember one guy two rows in front of me had a very tasteful toupee, and he got so into the music that he started bouncing up and down and his toupee started bouncing right along with him. I was afraid, and yet slightly hoping, the thing was going to fly off and land in someone’s lap.

But then things moved from weird to scary for me. People started talking and shouting, but it was no language I had ever heard. It’s like they were possessed. Then a lady next to me fell on the floor and started writhing around like she was having a seizure. I was terrified. A few men sat next to her and held her arms down until she slowed down and finally stopped. As we left the church, I asked my friend’s father what was wrong with the woman. And I’ll never forget what he said. “Aw, nothing’s wrong with her. She was just filled with the Spirit. Don’t worry, Kory. If you’re a believer, it will happen to you, too.”

I didn’t go back to church for a long time. And I still shudder at that memory every time I read today’s passage about Pentecost. Because of my church experience, for a long time I thought the Holy Spirit was something frightening that possessed people’s toupees and gave other people seizures, and I didn’t want anything to do with it. That’s not the kind of experience that holidays are built on, so Pentecost doesn’t get the same attention in the church.

The original Pentecost story in Acts doesn’t do much to help dispel the mystery. Pentecost was a festival 50 days after Passover during which the Jews celebrated the gift of God’s law and the reaping of the spring harvest. Jews from around the region were gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. So far, so good. But then, things get a little weird. A violent wind comes blowing through and then tongues of fire descend on each disciple gathered, causing them to speak in other languages. Could you imagine how this must have appeared to the casual

Cappadocian or Pamphylian? No wonder they accused the disciples of being drunk. I could have made the same claim about the people I saw worshipping at the “weird” church.

And yet, as Peter clarifies, the disciples were indeed under the influence, but not of wine. It was a Spirit thing. It’s interesting that the Spirit appeared as fire. Fire was a common metaphor for God in the Hebrew Scriptures, but when it comes to the Holy Spirit, we tend to think more of wind, like when Jesus said to Nicodemus in John’s gospel, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” The Greek word for spirit is “pneuma,” which means breath or wind, like the forced air in a pneumatic tube.

But at Pentecost, the Spirit appears as another uncontrollable natural element. And what this tells us is that a person under the influence of the Spirit is a person who is on fire, who burns to serve God, who is able to bring light and warmth to a cold, dark world. A church filled with people on fire for God is the kind that attracts people to it. When a church is on fire with God’s Spirit, people want to see where the smoke is coming from.

But how do you know? In your heart, how do you know when the Spirit of God is at work? I’ve yet to see someone at this church speak in tongues or writhe on the ground, except during our men’s basketball league and that person got an ice pack, not the Holy Spirit. So how do we know the Spirit is at work here? IS the Spirit at work here? Or is something wrong with us because we don’t speak in tongues? It would be nice if we always had tongues of flames like huge neon arrows over a person’s head. “Holy Spirit working here!” But since that’s not the case, how do we know?

I had a theology professor try to clear this up for me in his own sarcastic way. He asked this question of us during class, and a student responded, “I know the Spirit is at work in me because I can just feel it in my gut, stirring and moving and making things happen.” And my professor astutely asked, “How do you know it isn’t gas?” How do we know?

Some people want to quantify the answer, provide certain marks or criteria to distinguish the work of the Holy Spirit from gastrointestinal rumblings. I’ve had some people tell me that speaking in tongues is a definitive sign of the Spirit’s presence. In fact, down through history there have been religious movements that have required a demonstration of speaking in tongues in order to join the church. And you thought just walking to the front of the sanctuary was intimidating! Even though Jesus tells us the Spirit can’t be tamed, we humans like to think we are in control, even of something as uncontrollable as the Holy Spirit.

I think this is dangerous. Maybe I’m saying that because I’ve never spoken in tongues. I’ve seen a lot of people who have, and I don’t doubt that the Holy Spirit was in them, but I find it hard to believe that all the loving Christian people I know are lacking the Spirit because they haven’t spoken in tongues. If I remember correctly what Paul wrote, he said that speaking in tongues is a gift of the Spirit, and should be respected as such, but so is teaching, and leading, and serving, and encouraging. Have you spoken in tongues? If you have, that’s a sign of the Holy Spirit working through you. Have you taught? Or served? Or encouraged someone? That’s signifies the same thing. No human has the power to say how and when and where and through whom the Spirit works. We just don’t know.

In the Pentecost story, I believe Peter gives us some more ways to detect the movement of the Spirit in our midst. To paraphrase his sermon, he says, “Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young people will see visions and your seasoned veterans will dream dreams.” You know what it means to prophesy? It means to tell someone what God will do. When Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied, they told the Israelites what God was going to do if they

didn't shape up. But prophesying isn't only about proclaiming God's judgment. Prophesying can also mean to share the good news of God's work in our lives. I like the fact that Peter doesn't say, "And your pastor, in flowing robe and colorful stole, while standing behind a wooden pulpit, will prophesy." It's not only my job to preach. It's yours, too.

Now, that doesn't mean I'm going to pass around a signup sheet for the Sundays in June and ask you to take one. I'll make you deal: Trish and I will take care of the preaching on Sunday morning, and you all can handle the rest of the week. We get the easy part. People expect preaching on Sunday morning. I don't have to ask your permission when I preach, only your forgiveness sometimes afterward.

The famous theologian Martin Luther once said, "Everyone, by virtue of baptism, is called to preach. All baptized Christians are expected to speak the Gospel to their neighbors, to testify to the mighty works of God, to tell people about Jesus. The thing is, on Sunday morning, we can't all possibly speak at the same time and be understood, so some of the baptized are designated to be preachers. They are the ones who speak on Sunday morning so that the rest of us may speak about Jesus Monday through Saturday morning. The preacher preaches, so that the congregation may preach." In other words, take what you see and hear and share it with others. Tell your story.

Peter also tells us that when the Spirit is present, people will see visions and dream dreams. What that tells me is that when the Holy Spirit is at work in a congregation, they are never completely comfortable. They are always leaning forward, straining to see who God is calling them to be. Until everyone knows where their next meal is coming from, we can't be content. Until every life matters, we can't get comfortable. Until women don't need to flee to abuse shelters, we should be restless. Until no one feels outside of God's love, we can't relax. If the Spirit is here, then we are constantly dreaming about who God is calling Crestwood to be. When you look ahead five or ten years in the life of this church, what do you see? See that vision. Dream that dream. And then commit your heart to making it happen. The Spirit has been poured out on you, and it's pretty hard to stay quiet when you're on fire.

Our challenge is to not stand still, to continue to stay open to the Spirit's working as it calls us to new and exciting directions. Lives are being changed as Christ works through us. People are smelling the smoke. The church is on fire! May we be willing to fan the flames of the Spirit's work so that we can live out this wondrous calling, dreaming dreams of who God is calling us to be. Tell your story, show people God's work in your life, preach the Good News through your actions and your generosity, and watch how God uses it to change the world. That's how you know the Holy Spirit is at work. Merry Pentecost!