

The Church in Action sermon series
The Story of Pentecost – Acts 2:1-21
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The lady in front of me was acting weird. As the music began, she started swaying her hips and then raising her hands, nothing out of the ordinary. But as the music intensified, so did her motions. Her hand-waving went from “How ya doin’?” to “I’m over here!” She started bouncing up and down, and then suddenly fell to the ground writhing around like she was having a seizure. Two men next to her held her arms down until she finally stopped shaking. What kind of concert was this and how many drugs were involved? Folks, this wasn’t a concert. It was at church.

Not our church, mind you. The only hand-waving we have here is from the kids at Children’s Time. No, this was a church to which I was invited when I was a kid. I knew the church had a reputation for being “weird,” but it was my friend’s church, so it must be OK. The church worshipped in a big auditorium with chairs and screens, and when the worship started, people were dancing and singing and throwing their hands in the air like they were doing the Holy Hokey Pokey. And then the lady collapsed and I got scared. I asked my friend’s father what was wrong and he said, “Aw, nothing’s wrong with her! She’s just filled with the Holy Spirit. Don’t worry, Kory, if you are a believer, it will happen to you, too.”

Today, we’re continuing our sermon series on the book of Acts, which chronicles the start of the movement that will become Christianity. Last week, we got Jesus out of the way by putting him on the heavenly elevator – going up! – but not before he promises the disciples that they will soon receive the Holy Spirit. When we left off, the disciples were staring at the sky and wondering, “Now what?”

Today’s story is the fulfillment of that promise and the answer to that question. 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 supernatural. 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. But I have to be honest with you. I don’t know what to do with the Holy Spirit. I mean, where do you even start? We can conceptualize God – to a certain point. We know Jesus, he was a real person that left footprints on this earth. But the Holy Spirit? We just don’t know about the Spirit, and that unknowing scares us. What is it? Is it the ghost of Jesus still roaming the earth? Is it some sort of poltergeist that possesses people’s bodies and makes them do strange things like put drum kits in their sanctuaries? What is this thing called the Holy Spirit and what in the world are we supposed to do with it?

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. It’s the Spirit of God that hovers over the waters of creation and brings order out of chaos. And Jesus says 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?

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. He states, “God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people.’” On all people. That’s me AND you. But what does that mean? Peter continues, and I’m paraphrasing, “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.

At my last church, I saw a great example of the Spirit in action through one of our members. In our early service, which had about 30 people in it, we had an emotional worship service where we said goodbye to a longtime member who was moving and welcomed into membership two of our visitors. As we finished our closing benediction and began to break away, Fred, one of our oldest members, spontaneously began singing the Doxology: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow...” We all had goosebumps as we joined in with him and sang

these words of praise to God. Afterward, I thanked Fred for doing that and he said, “I don’t know where that came from.” I did. Gratitude is a gift of the Spirit. Like Fred, we’re all called to be a walking sermon, preaching the Good News.

Now, that doesn’t mean I’m going to pass around a sermon signup sheet for the Sundays and ask you to take one. I’m a bit scared about what some of you might say if I gave you a microphone. So, I’ll make you deal: the ministers 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. But you are called to make your life a sermon.

The 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 not to 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. Let’s get fired up!