

**2** When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup>'In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

<sup>19</sup>And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

<sup>20</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup>Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

The Word of God for the People of God.

### **Thanks Be to God.**

I have always had trouble with metaphors. As a child, I remember reading metaphors in books and being absolutely confused. "His face was a mask in the moonlight." Wait, what? Was it a mask, or his face? Did his face turn into a mask? Which is it, because it can't be both. Now I read books to my children and they give me the same strange look. My school is a zoo? How can you have a school that is a zoo? Do they really have monkeys at that school?

Similes serve the same purpose--they give us words, images, to describe something--the way it looks, the way it feels, how it sounds. These are the ways we describe the indescribable. Metaphors and Similes. I'm as busy as a bee. This tastes like heaven. This tastes like dog food. Your eyes are as blue as the clear blue sky. Words that attempt to describe the indescribable. Your room is a pigsty.

Luke uses these tools to describe the experience of Pentecost. A sound like the rush of a violent wind, divided tongues, as of fire. If we aren't careful, we may read it literally and think a mighty wind really did blow and a small fire did light over each head. The paraphrase called *The Message* brings it to life: "Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force--no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different

languages as the Spirit prompted them." Luke can't say exactly, precisely what was happening, what they were experiencing, where that sound came from or how the spirit moved--he's doing the best he can, but words, similes, metaphors are failing him. As I was reading this, I was thinking that at some point Luke should have just added a verse in that said, "You just had to be there." He is trying to put words to an experience that was beyond description, and just about beyond belief.

This is Pentecost. It's the birthday of the church. It is the giving of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity; it's the movement of God that created something new--it transformed this bunch of people gathered in a room into something they were not before, something you could join. They got caught up in the movement of the spirit, and then they themselves became a movement of the spirit.

There is some dispute among Christians about the Holy Spirit. What does the Spirit do, how does it feel, what does it sound like, look like. Remember, Luke used similes, he was scratching for something, anything, any kind of language to describe the activity of the Holy Spirit, and the experience of those who received it that day. Many Christians debate this, and some say that the only evidence of the Holy Spirit is speaking in tongues, speaking in a unique, special prayer language that is outside of any other language spoken on Earth. Now, to be sure, this is not what's happening in Acts on the day of Pentecost, but it only takes reading this once to say with certainty that something crazy happened on that day.

But the question sticks with me, and sometimes I hear from some of you: "How do I know that the spirit is moving? What does it feel like? What does it look like?" Is it an emotional experience? How do I know that's not just my breakfast talking back to me? Can you see it? Or do you just have to be there?

I'm going to pick on the Lutherans, but only because I married one. I once heard a joke that a Lutheran pastor gave each member of his congregation a red balloon as they entered the sanctuary on Pentecost. And he told them, "When you feel the Spirit move, let go of the balloon!" By the end of the service, the only two who had let go of their balloons were the ushers, because they couldn't hold the offering plate and the balloon at the same time...

What does it feel like? Can I see it?

Well, yes, you CAN see it. But not where you are expecting to see it. It's not in the rush like wind or in the sound like fire. For all the language that Luke offers up to tell us what it was like to be there, to experience that Pentecost moment, the proof, the sure sign of the Spirit moving on that day, in that place, did not really happen right then. It came in the many days that followed. Luke tells us that some, not all, people were receptive to the message that Peter preached that day, the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and something like 3,000 were added to those who received the Holy Spirit, were baptized, and immediately Luke tells us that they--those 3,000 newcomers--devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers--

can you see it? Can you see the Spirit who came upon them? Can you see the Spirit they received? Well, yes! Their lives were utterly transformed.

This is the way we see the Spirit: we see it in changed lives, changed habits, changed communities. Transformation is the wake that the spirit leaves when it passes through, sometimes all at once, sometimes slowly and steadily. Just as the trees bend and lean in the wind, we are moved by the Spirit blowing through our lives. We've all seen trees that have been blown by a strong wind in a storm--I drove through Mississippi and Louisiana about six months after Hurricane Katrina blew through, and as I looked at the trees, there was no question which direction the wind had blown. On the other hand, I have driven many times through the midwest and seen the same slant in the trees, bent, their growth redirected by years of steady wind. The Spirit works mightily, sometimes like a gust, and the spirit also moves steadily, in a slow redirection of our lives.

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It says something very important that the church was not begun simply by a meeting. It was not begun by Roberts rules of Order and a vote on a decision that was properly before the group--no the church was begun not by a motion, but by a movement. The church was birthed by the movement of God, the power of God through the Holy Spirit to move the people gathered that day and each day after.

So it's easier sometimes for us to cling to the thing God's Spirit created, the thing that was birthed, the church, than it is to cling to God. Once you learn to love the church, with all its faults, it's tempting to see the church as the end-goal of the Spirit's movement on that Pentecost day.

But God did not make the church for itself, the Spirit did not move and form and birth this community for its own sake. God has no use for the church if the church is only living for itself, if its primary goal is to keep itself going. Friends, there is a word for that--it's called idolatry. If we long for new people to come to church in order for the church to grow and for the pews to be full and for things to be exciting, then we have missed the boat entirely. God created the church because God cares about the world and all who inhabit it, so the minute we cease to serve the people and the world God loves is the minute we cease to be the church, and we lean defiantly against the wind of the spirit. We are called to be active servants, givers, infusers and dispensers of the abundant life we are receiving each day from God--we offer it to one another, to our neighbors and our families, to our enemies and to strangers, even to those we are afraid of. To live as a community that exists for its own self-propagation, its own continuation, growth for the sake of getting bigger, is to plug our ears at the sound of that rushing wind, to shut our eyes to the fire, to convince ourselves that it really is about us, because it's much scarier, it's much more dangerous when it is about God.

The journalist David Brooks spoke to graduating college seniors several years ago, and he encouraged them--actually he challenged them to set aside what he called the American obsession with self-fulfillment, and instead to commit to serve

others and to meet the challenges that face the world around them. "Most successful young people, he writes, "don't look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life...Most people don't form a self and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling."

I would argue that the same is true for churches. Our bishop put it this way: "Ask: What are our congregation's unique gifts? And ask: What in our community breaks God's heart?" Friends, in the intersection, we find our calling. In the intersection we find the Spirit moving, creating newness and abundance. In the intersection we find people learning English and securing jobs; in the intersection we find people walking from loneliness and isolation into community, into redemption from addiction; in the intersection we find youth putting their hands to hammers and saws and joining those hands to pray with new friends; in the intersection we find teachers and helpers singing and dancing with children who hear for the first time that no matter what else they are, they are the beloved of God.

Friends, this is the Spirit moving in our midst. This is the activity of God among us, filling us with more than enough love to share with one another, and with those we meet, so that we, too, become part of that indescribable movement of the Spirit, the transformation, the growth, the movement that words cannot describe. You just have to be there.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Summary:

The experience of Pentecost went beyond what words can describe, but the Spirit's movement can really be seen in lives transformed by the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.