

DAWNING
THE AGE OF THE SPIRIT
Acts 2:1-21
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Pentecost Sunday, June 8, 2014

What's Pentecost really all about? When I was growing up I was told Pentecost was all about the birth of the Church. Some Sunday School teachers even made birthday cakes for their students to emphasize Pentecost was the day the Church was born. We were also told Pentecost was all about the Holy Spirit suddenly showing up to jumpstart the disciples, transforming them from being timid followers to becoming bold leaders. Then there were lessons about the Spirit being a mighty rushing wind blowing gales of empowerment over the disciples and to make the point Sunday School teachers would turn on fans full blast blowing confetti all over the room.

From the pulpit preachers would explain how this Holy Spirit was the fulfillment of one of Jesus' Upper Room promises made the night before he died. The Comforter, whom God would send in Jesus' name, would remind the disciples about everything Jesus taught them. Besides that the Holy Spirit inspired them to pick up where Jesus left off so they, like Jesus, could teach, heal and speak truth to power.

Of course the week before Pentecost everybody was encouraged to wear something red on Pentecost Sunday because red is the liturgical color of the Holy Spirit symbolizing the presence of God. We were then reminded how God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush and on the first Pentecost tongues of fire appeared over the heads of those gathered in the Upper Room.

Another thing we were taught, Peter and the others then spilled out onto the streets of Jerusalem and when they spoke, the people, who came from all over to celebrate the Jewish Festival of Pentecost, heard these newly minted apostles speak in each of their native languages.

These are the highlights talked about in churches on Pentecost Sunday with a special emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit guiding and equipping the Apostles so they could go out and change the world.

However, the following Sunday the red vestments and banners were put away until next year signaling everything went back to normal and everyone stopped talking about the Holy Spirit.

Poor Holy Spirit, getting our undivided attention for only one day of the year. Why? I think because it's hard for us to conceptualize the One we call the Holy Spirit. God the Father and God the Son seem to have fixed identities we can appreciate. God the Father is our Creator, and loving parent, Jesus the Son is one of us, fully divine, but also

fully human, born to make God up front and personal. Jesus even said, “I and the Father are one, when you see me, you see God.”

On the other hand because we’ve been taught the wind and fire metaphor the Holy Spirit is much more elusive and harder to pin down. Even the name “Spirit” lacks a definite definition because in Greek the word spirit simply means “air.” So God the Father and God the Son are presented as persons we can relate to but the Holy Spirit is only a blanket of air. Of course air is life-giving, we can’t live without it, and the same is true of the Holy Spirit, no Holy Spirit, no life. Even so compared to God the Father and God the Son the Holy Spirit doesn’t have a definitive personality making it seem the Holy Spirit is a role to play rather than a personality to know and love.

Knowing this it isn’t unusual for most Christians to see the Holy Spirit as a sort of stepchild of the Holy Trinity. The Father and Son get all the attention but the Holy Spirit seems to be an afterthought. But that isn’t how it’s supposed to be.

Read the Book of Acts and you’ll find the Holy Spirit front and center making me wonder if the Book of the Acts of the Apostles should have been called the Acts of the Holy Spirit because in the beginning the Church in Jerusalem was a Spirit-led movement spreading out into the world. The Apostles and their followers were so in tune with the Spirit that there were miraculous happenings that led to mass conversions. Lives were transformed, people were healed, the Church grew and everything changed. The Christians started out as a sect of Jews who followed Jesus but then the old barriers separating Jews from Gentiles broke down paving the way for the Apostle Paul to start a chain reaction in the world that’s still with us today.

So what happened between then and now? Why isn’t the Church as dynamic and growing, as it appeared to be in the beginning? And why do Presbyterians especially become very uncomfortable whenever faith healers and miracle workers come along, branding them as holy rollers or religious fanatics? I’m not talking about the ones you see on television who seem to play on peoples’ emotions. Certainly their focus on the sensational has a way of making many of us skeptical especially when we hear about the lavish lifestyles made possible by the financial donations they make off of needy and gullible people.

But don’t let their antics blind us to the power of the Holy Spirit alive in the world today. Everywhere there are faith communities quietly laying hands on the sick, praying for people in horrendous situations and always patiently waiting for the Holy Spirit to bring new life to a dying world.

I’m going to tell you something that happened to me when I was in college something I only occasionally think about but when I do I’m amazed. A friend of mine invited me to attend a worship service in someone’s house so out of curiosity I went. The worship leader gave the message and there was a lot of hymn singing. Then people were invited to come forward for the laying on of hands for anything from chronic illnesses to situational problems. At the time I was still a Catholic but open to exploring the various

expressions of the Christian faith, but I have to tell you I was also feeling very uncomfortable sitting in the basement of that house with a bunch of holy rollers.

Anyway, one of the worship leaders wandered up to me and gently put his hand on my forehead. The next thing I knew I was being physically held up by someone so I wouldn't fall on the floor. If you ever watched some of these faith healers on the television you've probably seen something like this happen. It seems like the faith healer knocks the person so hard on the head it makes him or her fall down. I understand they call it being "slain in the spirit." Well, that happened to me. I don't talk about it much, I never really don't understand it but this I can tell you something happened. Obviously I didn't pursue this brand of Christianity, instead I became a Presbyterian and you know what that's like. Even so I believe somehow that night something happened that blessed me in ways I don't understand.

So, why am I telling you this? Because I believe the power of the Holy Spirit continues to rush over us like a mighty wind. I believe that there are good, solid Christian people, who quietly seek out and tap into this power that comes from God, and it really works. In the last couple of months we've had many requests for the laying on of hands in the middle of our worship services from people going in for surgery or radiation/chemotherapy treatments. We have an active list of people in our bulletin who ask for our prayers and many of you go through that list every week, many times praying for just a name or a situation. Some would say it doesn't make sense, how can you pray for someone you don't know especially an unknown situation or crisis some unnamed person is going through? But we do it anyway because we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit dominates the Book of Acts as much as Jesus dominates the four gospels and in both cases God's power is manifested in ways that defy reason. Think about it, twelve fugitives, holed up in a room, on the run from the law waiting for God. They didn't know what to expect they had no handbook of instructions to follow, they had few, if any, resources and what's more they had a poor track record, that is, up to then they screwed up royally multiple times and let Jesus down when he needed them most.

And then, something happened. Luke tries to describe what it was like when the Holy Spirit came rushing in over and through them, using metaphors like wind and fire, and then reversing the old Tower of Babel story with everyone now hearing and understanding the Apostles as they were heard speaking in their native languages. We can try to deconstruct the story so it makes sense, but why bother? It's not the Holy Spirit who needs to make sense, it's us, you and I who need to make sense, and you know what? Only the Holy Spirit can help us make any sense of ourselves.

Five hundred years ago Martin Luther started the Great Reformation. It was his vision to go back to the beginning, to deconstruct the centralized power of the papacy, restore the priesthood of all believers and base our belief and practice of the Christian faith solely on the Word of God found in the Bible.

Five hundred years later some say we're on the cusp of a second great reformation and maybe this time the vision will be to return to the model of the Church found in the Book of Acts, when the Church seeks to once again become a Spirit-led movement open to the unleashing of the power of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit transforming timid church members into bold disciples or as Chesterton called that first generation of Christians, "fearless, happy, troublemakers.

The Holy Spirit has come, the Holy Spirit is coming and the Holy Spirit will come again. May we be ready so we're not left behind.