

Pentecost 2022

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Acts 2:1-21, Psalm 104.25-32, 1 Corinthians 12:4-13, John 14:8-17

*And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams... (Acts 2:17)*

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

Today we celebrate the wind of the Spirit and the fire of the Spirit, descending upon the disciples and giving birth to the church. These fragile followers of Christ are transformed into bold witnesses to the Gospel. From generation to generation, the Holy Spirit has sustained the church, renewed the church, guided the church, and empowered the church.

Throughout history the fire of the Spirit has kindled true faith in the hearts of God’s people and stirred them to run after the call of God. People have often tried to reduce the working of the Spirit to a technique or a science, but the wind blows where it wishes. There is always a certain mystery in the working of the Spirit, so we approach this day of Pentecost in wonder, in awe.

The disciples have been waiting together as the Lord instructed. Suddenly a mighty rushing wind fills the house and tongues of fire descend. In one sense, we might read the whole book of Acts as a narrative on the coming of the Spirit. When He comes, the weak speak out with great boldness, blind eyes are open to the truth, the enemies of God are transformed into friends, the body of Christ begins to move. When He comes, the love of Christ overflows among His people, and the world beholds the glory of God in Christ.

When I entered college, my sister suggested that the two of us visit Calvary Baptist Church, a church with a robust college group. Right after our first visit, I got a phone call from Stan Rogers inviting me to game night at the church. I don’t remember anything about that night, but I’ve always remembered that call. Stan welcomed me into the community where the Spirit would transform my life.

My first experience of the Spirit at Calvary Baptist was in the hospitality of God’s people. My sister and I were welcomed with open arms. Within a few weeks, we went down to Six Flags with a group of students. During the drive, I remember having a long conversation with Carlos Ritchie about Simon and Garfunkel. I stepped into a vibrant community where all of life was welcome.

During my college years, I worked a job, attended class, and served with the church for about 15-20 hours each week, but somehow it seemed like I had all the time in the world for late night conversations, spontaneous prayer meetings, and regular excursions.

My personal experience of the Holy Spirit goes hand in hand with the experience of a community of believers. All these people played a vital role in my faith.

I had cultivated a habit of daily Scripture reading in High School, but something changed in college. When I read the Bible, it was as though I was being addressed by God. The Word of God burned within me, and I carried a Bible everywhere I went, so I could read and reflect. When I went to class, I would read until the professor started teaching. As the writer of the Hebrews reminds us, the Word of God is living and active and that is exactly what I was experiencing.

Some of the students were always getting together often down at my folk's house. We played games, ate together, laughed together, and prayed together. I remember one night we met at midnight, in the dark with candles and had what we called a "Paul and Silas" party. We shared stories of God's goodness, sang songs and prayed.

At another point, I hosted a talent show at the Baptist Student Union. We put a big chair in the center of the audience and made it look like a throne. I called the show, "An Evening with the King." Each person performed as though the Lord was sitting in our midst because He was in our midst. We had comedy skits, magic, and singing. I asked one girl to sing Keith Green's "Rushing Wind" song. I think she was the final act. She took off her shoes and said that we were standing on holy ground. She sang,

Rushing wind blow through this temple,
Blowing out the dust within,
Come and breathe your breath upon me,
I've been born again.
Holy spirit, I surrender, take me where you want to go,
Plant me by your living water,
Plant me deep so I can grow.

A holy awe came upon the room, and we sat in tearful silence before the Holy One of Israel.

Life was saturated in prayer, Scripture, and fellowship. I met regularly with Roy Ameish from Jordan. We were praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We were also reading books about great moves of God and great leaders of God who experienced the Holy Spirit. These stories stirred us and provoked us to pray even more.

One day I was praying with Brent Connor at my house, when I experienced the gift of tongues. I fell in the floor laughing because I thought I had lost my ability to speak in English. This unusual experience of tongues could not be isolated from all these other experiences of life in community. Instead, I would say that the outpouring the Spirit was made known in and through the vital life of His community, His church.

At the end of Acts 2, we hear a great description of life in the Spirit.

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

They were hearing the teaching of God's Word, breaking bread, praying, worshipping, giving, and sharing life together. At the same time, the Spirit was bearing witness in and through them of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Life glimmered with the light of God's love. This to me is a great picture of Pentecost.

In the Old Testament, Pentecost is a celebration of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. The law was God's gift to Israel because it was the wise rule of life that could teach them to become a community, a united people worshipping God together. The coming of the Spirit united God's people and empowered them to live in a way that they became the body of Christ. They not only shared financial gifts, they shared spiritual gifts for the edification of one another, they shared their lives in loving service. They were becoming a holy people.

As I reflected on my experiences in college this week, I thought about how effortless this new life seemed. Reading Scripture, praying, meeting with other believers, eating together and learning life together. These were all as natural as breathing. But then in my final year of college, I experienced darkness, and I've shared this story before. It seemed as though the Lord left me. I felt anxiety, doubt, and a weary heart. Later, I would come to understand this season as a gift of the Lord where he refined me and taught me not to trust in my feelings. In the midst of the darkness, He drew me even closer to Himself. During this time, prayer, Bible study, and even fellowship became a discipline. I knew that this was the essential way of life.

We see a similar pattern in the New Testament. In Acts, we see this free-flowing community emerging with all the excitement inherent in a work of the Spirit. In Paul's letters and the Revelation, we see communities that are struggling and being called to obedience. Life in the Spirit seems to involve both aspects: the fresh wind of the Spirit that renews and edifies as well as the faithful obedience during times of difficulty. Obedience is continuing in Scripture and prayer and the Eucharist, but it is also fellowship. Spending time with God's people: eating together, sharing together, encouraging one another, and even laughing together. Most of the time, these patterns of life will come natural within the body, but there are times when we obey and live into to these patterns even when we don't feel like it.

The Spirit is raising us up to love and serve in good times and in difficult times. He is raising us up as holy witnesses of the love of God in Christ Jesus.