

Filled with The Fire
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 23, 2021-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Acts 2:1-21

Today, on Pentecost Sunday, we are starting a sermon series on the book of Acts, one that will take us all the way through the rest of the summer. Why a sermon series on Acts? Because Acts is a book about the restart of God's people. At the beginning of the book, you have a group of people in something like quarantine. They are spending their days together in the same room. They are still trying to comprehend the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, and they are still a little afraid of outsiders. They are all hanging together in the same bubble. But over the course of Acts the church comes out of quarantine, God pushes her out into the world and she finds herself in places she never imagined going, doing things she never imagined doing. It is our hope as we watch this church engage with the world, we will remember our role and our purpose and that the Spirit will renew us as we emerge from our quarantine. It's appropriate that we begin the series on Pentecost Sunday with Acts 2 and the Pentecost story, because Pentecost is the moment when the church emerges. We can't read to the end of the chapter. It's very long. But let's read the first 21 verses and let's watch what the Spirit does to them. And, before I read, let me say that I'm indebted to Tim Keller for some of the best insights in this sermon.

Let me tell you my least favorite thing about the book of Acts. Is that a good way to start a series? Probably not, but I'm going to do it anyway. My least favorite thing about the book is the title. The official title of the book is the Acts of the Apostles. This title implies that this is a book about the things that the apostles did to spread the gospel throughout the world. That's a misleading title. That's not what this book is about. The disciples are not the main actors in Acts. Who is the main actor? It's the same main actor we hear in this story. The main actor in this book is the Holy Spirit. The title of this book shouldn't be Acts of the apostles, it should be Acts of the Holy Spirit. In saying that I'm not trying to diminish the work of the apostles. They do many praiseworthy things in this book. But everything they do is prompted and steered and guided and powered and moved by the Holy Spirit.

Our story is a perfect example of that. Did these disciples do anything to pave the way for Pentecost? Was this rush of wind and fire something they scheduled? Was Pentecost part of their strategic plan? No. The Spirit is the lead actor here. The Spirit is doing all the moving and the shaking. The disciples cooperate, which is good, but mostly they are along for the ride. The image that comes to my mind is whitewater rafting. In this story they are like rafters in a class five rapids. They're doing stuff, putting their paddles in the water, steering a little, but all the power and the glory is coming from the river. In the book of Acts, the disciples are on a wild whitewater ride and the power and the glory of this ride is all from the Spirit.

So as we start this book on the Acts of the Holy Spirit, this story gives us a good sense, a kind of foreshadowing of the Spirit's priorities throughout the book. I want to look at two things the Spirit is doing in this story that tell us what the Spirit will do in the rest of Acts, and what the Spirit is still doing today. In this story we see the Spirit doing something on the inside, and something on the outside.

First, let's talk about what the Spirit is doing on the inside. What happened when the Spirit descended on the disciples? "A sound like the blowing of violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed like tongues of fire

that separated and came to rest on each of them.” That’s such a strange phenomenon. God could have chosen any phenomenon, why this? Fire on their head. Why did the Spirit show itself by making it look like their heads were on fire?

You need to go back to the Old Testament to understand that reference. In the Old Testament, fire was the sign of God’s presence. When God made a covenant with Abraham, do you remember how he appeared to Abraham in Genesis 15? It was a smoking firepot and a blazing torch that moved between the sacrifices. And then how did God appear to Moses? In the burning bush. Fire again. And when the law was given on Mount Sinai, how did God make his presence known on the top of the mountain? Fire and smoke—fire and smoke so terrible that no one dared approach the mountain. At the end of Exodus after the Tabernacle was built and the glory of the Lord entered into the tabernacle, how did the glory appear? A fiery cloud. The fiery cloud of God’s presence.

Do you remember what that fiery presence of God was called? It was the Shekinah glory. That Shekinah was glorious but also dangerous. Humans needed to be careful with that fire, because no unholy thing could approach it. The Israelites had to stand back from the fire of Mount Sinai, and they had to keep their distance from the holiest place in the temple. The Holy presence was kept behind the curtain of the temple and only the High priest was allowed to go there, and only after he had sprinkled everything with the blood of the atonement sacrifice.

But when Jesus died on the cross, what happened? The veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom and the Shekinah glory came out. Where did that fiery glory go? What new temple did it descend upon? At Pentecost we get the answer. That fire descends on us. The fire that was so glorious the people were terrified, that fire which lived in the center of the tabernacle and would consume any unholy thing that came into contact with it, that fire now lives in us! How can this holy fire live in imperfect people? Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, because we have been sprinkled and washed by the blood of Jesus, that Spirit lives in us. In Christ, you are the temple of God. I am the temple of God. We are the temple of God!

And when that fire rests on you it changes everything about your insides. Now you may say, “Wow that sounds great, but that doesn’t fit my experience. I don’t feel like I’m on fire for God. Those disciples at Pentecost are obviously on fire, but I feel pretty normal. In fact, there are a lot of days when I feel worse than normal. There are a lot of day when my faith feels pretty...meh. Does that mean the Holy Spirit doesn’t live in me?”

No. Remember, the Holy Spirit isn’t done with you. Yes, you are a temple of the Holy Spirit and yes, the Shekinah fire is in you, but your temple is under construction. Renovations are ongoing. There are still parts of your temple that are unsound. Maybe like a termite infestation, there are still other spirits who want to take up residence in you. Part of the Holy Spirit’s work is killing off those rebellious parts of you. Remember what the catechism said about true repentance. Reverend Bast mentioned it last week. True repentance is the dying away (the mortification) of the old self and the coming to life (the vivification) of the new self.

The Spirit is active in both parts of that cycle. Sometimes he’s killing off your old self. Sometimes he’s breaking down your old habits. That doesn’t feel good. That won’t feel like a spiritual high. That part of the Spirit’s work can feel like guilt, like discouragement, like failure, like restlessness. That part of the Spirit’s work can feel like a sick empty pit in your stomach. Any of these could be ways in which the Spirit is exterminating the infestation in your temple and making that room ready for renovation. The Spirit is also active in the coming to life of the new self. That feels much better than the mortification of the old self. That feels like joy and new life and hope. The book of Acts shows both sides of the Spirit’s work. In our passage the

disciples are experiencing the coming to life of the new self. And they respond with a joy so strong it's mistaken for drunkenness. But later after Peter finishes his sermon, the listeners will be cut to the heart by Peter's words. It will feel like they've been stabbed by Peter's proclamation. They will feel waves of guilt and remorse. Is that pleasant? No. But who do you think is stabbing them? It's the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is starting to kill off the old self. They are being mortified. Because the Spirit wants to do a new thing with them too.

We sometimes talk as if a Spirit filled person will only feel joy and contentment. This is false. It's not what we see in Scripture. It's not what we see in this story. So you may feel on fire today, or you may feel flat, or you might feel restless and unfulfilled. Whatever you feel, let me say, don't be afraid because the fire of God is in you. The Shekinah glory is in you. The power and the glory that shook Jerusalem on Pentecost is in you, and the Holy Spirit will not stop until all your fear and pride is gone and all that's left is joy.

The Pentecost story also shows that the Spirit is changing everything on the outside too. A couple of questions to lead into this point. Pentecost was one of the three great pilgrimage feasts of the Jewish year. On that day, Jewish people from all over the world would be in Jerusalem. Do you think it was a coincidence that God chose to send his Holy Spirit on a pilgrimage feast day? If it wasn't a coincidence, why would God choose that day? Because people from all over the world would be there, and this event was for the whole world. This outpouring isn't just for Jews; it is for everyone. God is not content to have his name acknowledged in one small middle eastern country, he means for his glory to travel from Jerusalem to the ends of the Earth. The Shekinah is going to take to the streets! What's happening here is going to change the whole outside world.

Second question: When God chose a miracle as a sign to the crowd, why do you think he chose the miracle of everyone hearing the gospel in their own language? There are a lot of signs he could have chosen. A miraculous healing. A voice from heaven. Walking on water. Why this miracle of everyone hearing the gospel in their language? It's a foreshadowing of God's intent. The gospel is going to these countries. God's plan is NOT for everyone to come to Jerusalem and learn to be Jewish, God's plan is for the gospel of his Son and the power of his Spirit to take root in every nation tribe and language. God's gospel begins by transforming hearts but it will not stop there. It will transform cultures. It will transform societies, it will confront corrupt rulers and bring them down from their thrones (watch out Herod!). By the time it is done, it will shake up the structures of slavery. It will transform the place of women in Roman society, it will give new dignity to the small and the weak, it will show the world a totally different way of power. A power that works through sacrificial love and grace.

Let me close with a story. George Whitfield was a great English preacher and evangelist of the 18th century. He later came to America and became famous here and a huge influence on American Evangelicalism, but he got his start in England. Whitfield was an Anglican priest, Oxford trained, but early in his ministry he became frustrated because he felt like the gospel message wasn't being heard. Services were sparsely attended. Lots of ordinary people—especially the poor and working class—weren't coming to church. So pushed by the Spirit, Whitfield decided to do something radical. He would preach outside. He would take his message to the streets, which wasn't done in those days. He lived in Bristol and so he decided to preach at the local coal mines, a place called Kingswood. He began by preaching to 200 men there, and soon the crowds grew. Hundreds of poor men, tired and covered with coal dust, would gather to hear him. These miners had miserable existence. Their lives were nasty, brutish and short. They couldn't believe that someone like Whitfield, this high-brow oxford grad would come and preach

to someone like them. So they would stop and they would listen, their dust-covered faces upturned towards him as he preached. Witnesses reported that as he preached suddenly these white streaks would appear on their faces. What were these strange white lines? It was the tracks of their tears as the Holy Spirit cut them to the heart. Those white tracks were a sign of the inside work of the Spirit's work.

But it wasn't just inside work. Those sermons to the miners were the beginning of the Great Awakening. It was a religious movement that swept through England and changed the church and changed the culture there. One of the young men swept up in that movement was William Wilberforce. You know his name. His faith and the work of the Holy Spirit in his life led him to the work of abolition. Through him and others like him slavery was abolished in England. That too was a movement of the Spirit. An outside movement that eventually spread here too. The fire changed the inside of the miners. The fire changed the inside of William Wilberforce, and then the fire changed Britain and the whole world. The fire is in you. The fire is out there. The fire is still burning.

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