

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Empowerment of the Spirit"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:1-21
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 23, 2021 (Pentecost) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

"Thanks!" to all of you who wore red clothing today to help us celebrate the flames of Pentecost. I always like to make a big deal about Pentecost because I don't think it gets enough attention. If you ask the average person what's the most important Christian holiday, they'll probably say Christmas or Easter. But I always say that the most important Christian day is Pentecost. I say that because, what if Jesus were born and died and rose from the grave, but no one ever talked about it? What if, at the end of the gospels, the disciples had just returned to their fishing boats and tax booths and the Holy Spirit had never come upon them? What if they had never gotten excited enough to go out and tell the good news?

That's why I'm devoting two months of sermons to the "Acts of the Spirit." We began last Sunday by reading from Acts, chapter one, about Jesus' ascension to heaven and the planned succession of the Spirit to the disciples and beyond. Today, we've moved on to Acts, chapter two. It was the annual Jewish Feast of Weeks harvest festival. It was also known as *Pentecost*, because it came 50 days after the Passover celebration. Following Jesus' instructions, the Christian believers were gathered together there in Jerusalem, expectantly praying and waiting for the Spirit to come. And, wow, did it ever come! As we consider the wind, fire, and languages that characterized that day, let's see how we too might share in the empowerment of the Spirit.

1--WIND

The Pentecost-Day empowerment of the Spirit began with wind. Acts 2:2 tells us that "suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting." Throughout the Bible, wind was often associated with God's Spirit. In the biblical languages of

Hebrew and Greek, the same word means *wind, breath, and spirit*. So, in the creation story in Genesis 1, God's wind-breath-spirit hovered over the deep and brought about the earth and all the life upon it. In Genesis 2, God breathed the spirit of life into the human Adam. Here, in Acts 2, God's wind-breath-Spirit was active again, this time giving life and vitality to the disciples, so they would be empowered for the ministry ahead.

Today we think of wind power as renewable energy. Unlike coal or oil reserves that could be used up completely, wind never ceases to blow. And that's a hopeful image for us. What happened on the Day of Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago isn't just a relic of the past. God's wind-breath-spirit is still blowing and giving life and energy today. Yes, as Acts 2:2 notes, the wind of Pentecost can be violent, and maybe even destructive. But sometimes that destruction of old habits and mindsets has to happen before new life can begin. May the wind of Pentecost blow, so that we can participate in the empowerment of the Spirit!

2--FIRE

The second symbol of Pentecost is, of course, fire. Acts 2:3 tells us that "divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." As I try to imagine what was going on that day, I think of a really ferocious thunder and lightning storm. Picture the Christian believers in an upper room with lots of window openings. During a lightning storm, it would appear as if that electricity were bursting into flames over everyone's heads.

Whenever I read this Pentecost story, I can't help but remember one year we were at Annual Conference in Ft. Collins, Colorado. Several hundred of us were packed into the sanctuary of Ft. Collins First United Methodist Church for the ordination worship service. It was a hot and humid June evening. There was no air conditioning in the church, so the exterior doors of the sanctuary were propped open to try to get some air flowing through. The ordination worship service had lots of pomp and circumstance, with the clergy all dressed in robes and red stoles. The giant organ pipes rang out the

music, the preacher spoke from an elevated pulpit, and the ordinands finally took their positions in the front of the sanctuary. Just as they were about to speak their clergy vows, there was a loud crack of thunder, and then another, and another. Then the downpour started pummeling the building with a mighty roar that got louder as the rain turned to hail. The ushers closed the doors to keep the rain and hail out, and in hopes that we could proceed with the service. It was hard to hear the rest of the ordination ceremony, but, still, there was something awesome and holy that happened that evening when the fire flashed in the sky. Both the congregation and the newly-ordained clergy were fired up for ministry, as we felt the empowerment of the Spirit.

The empowerment of the Spirit doesn't just come from the fire of lightning storms, of course. On Thursday, we had a big fire out in our church yard. Since it was a nice, mild day and the ground was still wet from recent rains, it was a safe time to make a fire. So we got a permit and burned up a bunch of tree branches and other yard debris that had been piling up out in the drainage pond area. Now the clutter is gone and our property is more attractive.

The same can be true for our lives, when we allow ourselves to be subjected to the purifying fire of God's corrective judgment. In Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-21, he quoted the Prophet Joel, who had used imagery of fire and smoke to talk about God's impending judgment and punishment, if his people didn't repent and change their ways. Fire can be a purifying element that helps rid our lives of trash and debris, old habits and mindsets that clutter and diminish our faith. If we allow God to burn up what's no longer useful, then we can benefit from the empowerment of the Spirit.

3--LANGUAGES

The third big sign of the Spirit's activity at Pentecost was the gift of languages. Jesus' disciples were largely Galilean fishermen and other people who didn't have all that much education. They hadn't traveled a lot. They hadn't been exposed much to other cultures, regions, and languages. And yet, on this great day when the wind and the fire came upon them, so did a miraculous ability to speak in the

native languages of people from all around the Mediterranean region. Acts 2:11 tells us that the Christian believers were using these many languages to speak about God's deeds of power. So, the empowerment of the Spirit was evident in the both the medium and the message, in both the speaking and the good news of Christ that was communicated.

Acts 2:14 indicates that—through the wind, the fire, and the languages—Peter was inspired and empowered to stand up with the 11 other disciples and address the crowd. And Peter did what any good preacher would do. He used the language of sacred scripture to make meaning of the events of his day. He refuted the critics who said that the Christians were just drunk. No, Peter explained. Centuries before, the Prophet Joel had spoken about these very things. Whenever God's people would repent of their sins and change their ways, then God's Spirit would come with power. God's Spirit would be poured out upon all flesh: on sons and daughters, young and old, men and women, slaves and free. All would be given the ability to speak the prophetic words of God's Spirit.

This language of the Spirit was not limited to one sacred tongue or dialect. The good news would be available for the people "of every nation under heaven" (2:5) so that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (2:21). That was true during the time of the Old Testament Prophet Joel, it was true on that great New Testament Day of Pentecost, and it's still true today. The empowerment of the Spirit works through languages that connect with the people—whether that's in the Queen's English or ghetto slang. Before anyone can call on the name of the Lord and be saved, they need to hear the message of repentance and forgiveness, of redemption and salvation. And they need to hear it in a language they can understand.

The International Bible Society website indicates that, as of 2020, the full Bible has now been translated into 704 of the world's languages. The New Testament has been translated into over 1500 languages. A lot of good translating work has been accomplished! But, since there are over 7000 living

languages in the world, there's obviously more work to be done if we are going to share the good news of Christ with everyone.

Regardless of Bible translations, however, all of us have the responsibility of communicating the gospel in ways that will connect with other people. Maybe you've heard the saying, "Your life may be the only Bible someone ever reads." Even if they know how to read the language of the Bible doesn't mean that everyone will. But they will undoubtedly observe your actions, your attitudes, your words, and your beliefs. They will notice if what you say and what you do match, or if there is hypocrisy in your life. They will also observe if you have hope, joy, peace, and love in your heart. They will read in the Bible of your life whether or not God has the power to save people from their sins and make them new. They will see in your beliefs and your behaviors how alive Jesus is today. In what you say at home, at work, at school, and in the community, they will hear—from your language—whether or not the Holy Spirit is acting in our day.

So I encourage you to speak the languages of God. On this Day of Pentecost, be ready to receive the empowerment of the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

The empowerment of the Spirit comes through wind, fire, and languages, all three. But because flames are such a strong image, I want to leave you with a couple of quotations that have to do with fire. Both of these sayings come from the 13th century Persian poet Rumi. He wrote, "Stay in the spiritual fire. Let it cook you." And he wrote, "Set your life on fire. Seek those who fan your flames."

Too much fire can be uncomfortable and even dangerous. But a certain amount is essential to purge and purify us and keep our faith alive and vital. Let's embrace the Spirit poured out at Pentecost. Let's open our hearts to the empowerment of the Spirit.