

“Where’s the Fire?”
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Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-21

It was sometime in the late 1980s. We were gathered to celebrate my Cousin Dan’s accomplishment as he had achieved the rank of Eagle Scout. After the ceremony, there was a very nice reception in the church’s fellowship hall. People waited in line to pick up their finger sandwiches and cookies. Dan’s older sister, Angela, was helping out by serving punch. Everything was going well until Angela turned her head one particular way and got her long, 1980s, hair-sprayed hair into a lit candle. Her hair lit up more like a snap, crackle, pop than like a torch. No fire extinguishers were required. She and others put out the fire in her hair just by patting it out. Even though the fire on her head was not a big fire, it still was unpleasant. I still remember the smell of burning hair. And, we still tease Angela about that day.

This story is what came to my mind when thinking about the tongues of fire appearing on the people’s heads at Pentecost. To be honest, it *isn’t* a very appealing image.

And then there’s the wind. Luke calls it a violent wind. This past week, there were several outbreaks of violent storms, including tornados, over large portions of the country. I have a friend in Texas who posted the following on Facebook: “The neighborhood about 1/4 mile down the street looks like a war zone...all around that area trees are down and several cars were crushed under the trees...not to mention several houses have new skylights compliments of the storm.” I remember a storm like that a few years ago in Tennessee, which knocked huge portions of trees in our yard, including much of the crown of a tree in our backyard very near our bedroom, as well as uprooting huge trees all over the city. And I remember clearly the 100-mph straight line winds which went through Memphis in July of 2003, taking out power to 70% of the city, with many areas not getting power restored for weeks. No, a violent wind is not so appealing, either.

Then, there’s the combination of wind and fire, like we have seen lately in Alberta, Canada. These massive wildfires are spread greatly by large winds. Firefighters must be conscious not only of where the fire is, but where the winds are blowing. One news story was headlined “Wind-whipped wildfire puts half of Fort McMurray on evacuation notice.” Eventually, all of Fort McMurray was evacuated and some areas were a 90% loss. No, fire and wind together can be a catastrophic combination.

The images Luke gives us in Acts of the day of Pentecost are not calm, controlled images. They are wild, untamed images. There was noise, wind, fire, voices shouting, movement, out of control religious excitement. Is this uncontrollable Spirit of God *really* what we want around here? Aren’t we more comfortable with the Presbyterian ideal of “decently and in order” as found in 1 Corinthians 14:40? I know I am.

When we think of the Spirit, I imagine we often picture a less violent image. We might think of Jesus' baptism, when the Gospels tell us that the Spirit of God descended from heaven like a dove. That's a great image for the Spirit – a gentle, lovely creature, a symbol of comfort and peace. The Holy Spirit may be seen as a source of peace and God's presence in our lives, in times of trouble, certainly, but also in the rest of our lives. The Spirit as a dove rests upon us, reminding us that we are God's children and that we are loved.

We probably think about some classic hymns and songs of the faith. "Breathe on me, breath of God." It's a quiet, slow song. When singing it, we probably don't picture God breathing on us with a violent wind. Then, there's "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me." In that one, we sing "melt me, mold me, fill me, use me," but I wonder how much we really want to be melted and molded. Another one – "there's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place." One pastor asked, "How many times can you sing 'There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in This Place' without your blood sugar reaching diabetic levels?"¹ We seem to sing about that dove image of the Holy Spirit, a peaceful, calming spirit, and that *is* one aspect of the Spirit, but it isn't the only one.

The Spirit of God is something we can't really get a handle on. Perhaps, it is something like blowing up and releasing an untied balloon. This is a game that many children enjoy. It's much more fun to blow up a balloon and release it into the air than to tie a knot into it! Releasing a balloon filled with air makes it zoom around the room unpredictably. Sometimes, the spirit of God works like that. You don't know where the balloon will go when you release it. The Spirit of God is often something wild, not a gentle breeze – remember Luke called it a "violent wind."

The Spirit came that day as a mighty, rushing, violent wind, with tongues of fire. This is not a peaceful and calm image of the Spirit – it is one of force and might. It is a compelling power. The disciples were gathered for prayer, but were driven into the streets of Jerusalem, proclaiming the message of the risen Christ, with each person hearing the message in their own language. In many ways, it is a counterpart to the Tower of Babel story we read about in Genesis. In that story, the people all had one language, and they wanted to build a great tower to the heavens, in order to make a name for themselves. It was a *self*-centered event. In the Pentecost story, there were many languages, but each heard their own language, speaking of God's deeds of power. It was a *God*-centered event. Today, when we heard the passage from Acts read in many languages, it was not exactly like the day of Pentecost. However, I do hope that each person here was able to hear about God's deeds of power in a language familiar to them. We got a small glimpse of the day of Pentecost.

It was an amazing day. The Spirit came in a mighty rush and filled everyone there to overflowing. Just like that untied balloon, the Spirit's wind blew about in a way that was not very orderly. In fact, some believed that the people filled with God's Spirit were actually just drunk.

¹ <http://www.mickeyanders.com/Sermons/Sermon20070527.html>

Peter rushes to their defense, saying this is a fulfilment of the prophet Joel. God is pouring out the Holy Spirit upon men and women, young and old, slave and free. This is a dramatic statement, particularly for a culture which did not value women, the elderly, and certainly not slaves, but Joel says the day will come when the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon *all* of God's people. Peter says this is what is happening on the Day of Pentecost. God's spirit is being poured out on all.

It's also a bit surprising that it is Peter who makes this bold connection. Peter has not exactly been a model believer up to this point. Just after Jesus told Peter that he was to be the rock on which the church was built, Peter told Jesus that there was to be no cross in Jesus' future. Jesus compared Peter to Satan on that occasion. Then, just before the death of Jesus, Peter denied knowing Jesus, three times. There are other occasions in the life of Peter where he just doesn't get it right. As one pastor put it, Peter is "the one apostle during Jesus' earthly life who is generally obtuse and clueless when it comes to fully comprehending Jesus' mission and ministry."² But now, Peter shines. And maybe we can say more specifically that the Holy Spirit enables Peter to shine. The Spirit is at work in Peter that day, as he preaches quite a sermon, one which Acts tells us leads 3000 people to believe. I'd call that a good day. If the Spirit can enable Peter to such a profound witness, I feel quite certain the Spirit can lead us to an amazing ministry, as well.

Will it be quiet and calm, like a dove? Yes, sometimes, but not always. That's not the way the Spirit always works. In fact, though the Roman Catholic Church chose the image of the dove to represent the Spirit, Celtic Christians chose a different image. Ancient Celts understood the Holy Spirit to be less like a dove than like a wild goose. That is their symbol for the Spirit – a wild goose. The Spirit is wild, noisy, unpredictable, and even dangerous. One pastor puts it this way:

When the Spirit comes in the Bible, it never seems to be sweet or safe. God's Spirit called the prophets to speak to Israel in words that were bold and sometimes dangerous. Ezekiel saw a vision of God's Spirit blowing through a valley of dry bones and bringing them to life. John the Baptist dressed in camel's hair and eating wild locusts proclaimed, "I baptize you with water but he who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."³

The Spirit of God is not something tame and controllable. The Spirit is like a wild goose – not something that we can domesticate. The Spirit's call on our lives is not to save lives of complacency, but to daring lives of discipleship. We are to heed the Spirit's call on our lives to venture out in new ways – knowing that some of these new ways will fail. The life of a disciple of Christ is not to be boring, and it's not always going to be sweet. The Spirit will lead us into new ways of being the hands and feet of Christ in the world today. The Spirit will sometimes send us out like an untied balloon, not knowing exactly where we are going, but certain that we are being *sent*. The Spirit will even set us on fire sometimes – perhaps metaphorically, rather than literally, as it was for my cousin Angela. The life of a

² <http://stpaulseasternshore.com/Portals/stpauls/Sermons/May%2027%202012%20sermon%20td.pdf>

³ <http://www.resurrectionpeople.org/resources/sermons/wildgoose.htm>

Christian is not our own – we belong to God, and we must allow the Spirit of God to blow us where God chooses, rather than tie ourselves down to where we are comfortable and safe. We sometimes sing “Have Thine Own Way, Lord” and we better be sure we really mean that, for the Spirit of God may take us places we never imagined. On this day of Pentecost and always, may we be open to the violent wind, the tongues of fire, and to the leading of the Wild Goose Spirit of God. Amen.