

SEEING A NEW DAY

Acts 2: 1-18

Pentecost Sunday, c; May 23, 2010

Stephen R. Montgomery

Idlewild Presbyterian Church

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, come. From your breath all creation drew life in the beginning. By your Spirit, breathe new life into the children of earth now. Come, Holy Spirit of understanding, show us all things and all people in the light of eternity. Amen.

I don't know how many of you have ever had one of those high, holy moments in which not only all is right with the world, but all is right between you and God. A sense of God's presence, an awareness that the Spirit of God is brushing against the earth. When earth and heaven seem to touch. We all long for them. Some pastors and worship leaders spend an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to manufacture them in worship—loud, insistent, throbbing music, shouted, rapid-fire preaching, calls to surrender to the authority of the leaders. The only problem with that (apart from some of the theology coming forth from the preachers) is that such an emotional experience is so often not genuine.

But one thing is for sure, if you have had one of those liminal moments of being touched by the Spirit, you know that that feeling does not last long.

We were gathered around the campfire. It had been an exhilarating week at Camp Hanover. We had hiked and camped out and performed a few middle of the night high jinks over at the girls' hogans. We, boys and girls alike, had pledged our friendships to each other for life and now it was the final night. The campfire was ablaze, and several people talked about how much the week meant to them. We held hands and sang "Kum Ba Yah" and swayed back and forth. We had heard a missionary from Africa talk that week, and I could envision myself going to Africa and becoming a martyr for the faith. There would be a monument built and people from all over would come and say "This is where Steve gave his life for Jesus." I don't know if I'd say it was the Holy Spirit moving me, but I did feel an emotional high.

And then the thunder sounded and the rains came whipping down and the fire was drowned out and we were all drenched and muddied and the little bridge over the creek was washed away. One thing is for sure, those spiritual highs do not last long.

The year King Uzziah died Isaiah had a holy moment. He saw the Lord, lifted high and lifted up, with six-winged angels singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." The house was filled with smoke and he said "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips! ...yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Whatever Isaiah had been before that day, he would forever afterwards be a prophet of the living God. But the feeling didn't last. It was over almost before it was begun. The seraphs flew away and the nation Israel was soon sent into exile.

There was the day when Zechariah was in the temple doing his priestly things, burning incense, making burnt offerings to God, and the angel announced the gospel news to him: John the Baptist would be born. Zechariah was left speechless.

But it didn't last long. He got his speech back, and his boy John ended up with his head on a platter. But from that day on he blessed God more fervently than ever. He was a new person, not just a priest going through rituals, but one who proclaimed in a new way the blessings of a living God who would bring light in darkness.

It was an incredible day in Jerusalem. Jews had gathered from all over the world for this festival fifty days after Passover—from east and west and north and south. Some were hiding away in a house, not the temple, waiting, waiting for something. They thought it was Jesus they were waiting for because he was the one who had told them to go to Jerusalem and wait for God's promise to come true. He was the one who had told them that they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit and clothed with power from on high. So they waited, and they were afraid.

And then, all of a sudden, they heard the wind ... (sound of wind) ... and the Spirit of God seemed so close you could almost see it, like tongues of fire. The Spirit of God was so close you could almost hear it, like the sound of rushing winds. And then the disciples began to speak in other languages. They spoke the gospel in a fashion that others could understand. There were Parthians, Medes, and Elamites there; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia. They not only came from every place, they came from every time.

The Medes, for example, must have had a rather difficult journey to Jerusalem since they would not only have had to travel several hundred miles, but several hundred years as well, Medes having already disappeared from the canvas of history. The same is true of the Elamites, who seems to have wandered over to this Pentecost story not from the Tigris River, where the Elamites once lived, but rather from the annals of history and the pages of the Old Testament.¹

Luke, you see, is telling this story as an artist and a theologian, not as a scientific historian. But by the end of the day, 3,000 sign up for the New Members Class and joined the church. That's quite a day. It is a day we don't want to forget because, to tell the truth, it is a day that doesn't happen very often. This day was so powerful, so transforming, so new that we refer to this day as the birthday of the church. People from all over the world, east and west, past and present, all converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Three thousand, Luke tells us, all in one day. It was a high holy day, when the power of God's own Spirit was so real you could almost see it, like tongues of fire; you could almost feel it, like the rush of a mighty wind.

I've never experienced anything quite like that in church, but I have been moved to tears at times because of some power that left no doubt in my heart that God was so close I could almost see God; so close I could almost hear God's voice.

Sometimes it happens, not necessarily as clearly as it did for Isaiah, who saw six-winged seraphs; or as powerful as it was for Zechariah, who was left speechless; or as strong as it was

for Saul who was knocked down to his knees and left him blind. But sometimes the power of God's Spirit comes to us, and we know that God's power is brushing against the earth.

If you have ever had any kind of experience like that—perhaps in the mountains or by the beach or at NaCoMe or just at your kitchen table—a moment when you just knew that you were in the presence of God—then you know that the feeling does not last. You know that, don't you? The sense of God's presence is always passing. It never remains as long as we wish it would.

Isaiah, Zechariah, Saul. It didn't last. And here, Luke tells us that they spoke in various languages that day, and Peter interpreted the meaning, and the church grew, but there is nothing in the text to suggest that it lasted. Soon they were back to Aramaic. Soon they went about their business. There are some things in life that just happen too quickly.

I have a friend who has the mechanical and technical ability that I do—that is to say, nothing, nada, zilch. One day he couldn't get the oven to work. He turned the knob to "bake" and set the temp on 400. Nothing happened. He touched the elements; there was not heat. He even turned the temperature up to 9000 degrees or so: nothing. He switched knobs for a few minutes, and then finally slammed the door. "What's wrong with it?" his son asked. Careful to avoid technical language that would confuse his son, he said "It's broken." So he called the repairman. Soon a fellow with "Nick" written on his shirt showed up at the door. He walked over to the oven and turned off the timer. You know, that knob that can delay the oven for hours. He turned the timer off. It began to heat immediately. He slapped a bill on the kitchen table and said, "That should do it." He was gone.

My friend says that the thing that made him so angry was that it happened all too quickly. Nick could have at least stuck around long enough to stroke his chin and say "Hmmm" a few times. He could have at least pretended to look around the back, check the coils, pondered something. But no, he was gone. Door to door in less than 90 seconds. Some things happen too quickly.²

You wait 12 years for this date. It's all over now except walking across the stage. All those classes and papers and labs and research report and readings and tests and homework and more classes and papers. And there you are. You are standing in the wings and they read your name. And you walk across in about 10 seconds. And its all over before you can blink. Some things just happen too quickly.

That's the way it must have felt like at Pentecost. The Spirit of God rushes upon them, and they are transformed; they can speak in other tongues and they begin to hear and understand each other. Three thousand join the church. It was a high, holy day. But then it was over. Luke doesn't tell us that the disciples spoke these various languages forever—just that one day. Luke doesn't tell us that the tongues of fire followed them around until they were old men and women. No, they were there just for a moment. That's the way it is with the Spirit of God. It never lasts.³

And yet, and yet, in that moment, in that holy moment, these fragile, frightened disciples, whatever they had been before would, from that day until their dying breath, live as the church of Jesus Christ.

That closeness of the Spirit never lasts. It's not supposed to. The emotion can pass, but the work of the Spirit of God is not simply to cause us to feel something. The work of the Spirit is to reorient us, to give us eyes to see a new day. The work of the Spirit is not simply to cause us to feel warm for a moment, but to lead us to dream things we couldn't imagine; and to imagine things we could hope; and to hope for the new day God intends.

It was just for a moment that Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up with the angels singing "Holy, holy, holy." And then it went away. But from that day on, he would be the prophet of the living God.

For Zechariah, it lasted only a moment when the angel spoke good news to him. But from that day on, he proclaimed the blessings of the living God.

For Saul, the voice in the clouds would go away, and the blinding light would recede, but he would, from that day on, live as an apostle of the living Christ.

Sure enough, the winds died down. Most of them didn't know what hit them. They didn't remember seeing tongues, as of fire, over anyone's heads. That passed quickly. Before long, Peter was back to speaking Aramaic, just like always; but the Spirit had left them transformed. They had been given a glimpse of a new day.

In time, Philip would baptize a eunuch from Ethiopia. Why? Because he had seen a new day. Peter would visit the home of Cornelius, a Gentile of the Roman army and sit down to eat with him. Why? Because he had seen a new day.

Friends, the reason you and I are here today is because they saw life in a new way.

- They believed that forgiveness was more powerful than revenge, and they preached it.
- They believed that love was more powerful than status, and they lived it.
- They believed that all people belonged to God and should be treated as such, because one day, when they were in an upper room, the Spirit of God blew upon them. It didn't last too long. Less than a day.

Have you ever had a moment when the Spirit of God was so close you could almost see it, almost hear it like the rushing winds? I know some of you have, because I see it in your dreams. I see the fingerprint of the Spirit in your hope, your passion and commitment. I see it as your imaginations are stirred and you begin to see what the living God can do with you, and with this church. I see it because you keep on coming back; not simply to have a warm, emotional feeling. But you keep on coming back because you have felt called by the Spirit to worship God; to serve God, to serve others.⁴

That's the work of this Pentecostal Spirit. It's not simply to make us "feel" good, because feelings come and go. The work of the Spirit is to cause us to dream that which we could never imagine; and imagine that which we could never hope; and to hope for the new day of Jesus Christ which will last forever.

Amen.

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¹ Tom Long, "A Night at the Burlesque: Wanderings through the Pentecost Narrative," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 1990, p. 28.

² My thanks to Tom Are, Jr, who told this story about his father, Tom Are, Sr. in a sermon. "It never lasts...Does it?" May 30, 2004. I am indebted to Tom for the theme of this sermon.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Acts 2: 1-18

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. **5** Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" **13** But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." **14** But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. **15** Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. **16** No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: **17** "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. **18** Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.