Acts 2:1-21 *Wind and Fire: The Promise of the Holy Spirit*

***When the Wind Hits***When I was a kid, my family would go on vacation by staying at lakeside resorts in Minnesota. We didn’t have a particular lake or resort that we favored, it was more like a scavenger hunt to find the best resort possible. Each year, part of our vacation was dedicated to visiting other resorts to see if we could find one we liked better than the one we were at.

Anyway, one year the resort we were at had sailboats and windsurfing boards available for guests to use. I’d never been windsurfing before, but it was something a wanted to try. I had visions of those videos you sometimes see from Hawaii and such—you know, guys in wet suits with these colorful windsurfing sails climbing up twenty-foot ocean waves and launching themselves into the air while a rock-n-roll track plays in the background. Obviously, this was nothing like that. This was an old, clunky, converted paddle board with a sail attached to it on an oversized pond in Minnesota.

Still, my mom and I wanted to learn; and the owner of the resort was willing to give lessons; so we signed-up and headed down to the beach. Now, one of the things I’ll always remember about that lesson was one of the first things the guy asked was whether or not we had good balance. My mom said, “I do. But I’m not so sure about him…” I was about 12 at the time. I thought that was unnecessary. Probably the reason I remember this story so well is the first time he had us go out into the water and practice getting onto the board, I was able to stand up, and mom fell right back in. I thought that was poetic justice. (I should have told this story last week, when my mom was here. But I know she watches it on the internet. Hi Mom!)

We practiced getting onto the board and standing up, and then he had to teach us how to pull in the tether rope so that the sail was in our hands. That was tricky, because we didn’t want the sail to catch the wind until we were ready. Then he explained that we would slowly turn our backs to the wind and let the sail out until the wind caught it. At this point, I asked him: “How will we know when the wind has caught the sail?” And he just sort of chuckled and said, “Trust me. You’ll know.”

And, of course, the first time I managed to stand-up, perform the tricky maneuver of pulling in the sail, and then tentatively open it up to the wind—the wind grabbed the sail and pulled me head-first into the water. I knew when the sail caught the wind all right. It took quite a few tries before I was able to lean back enough to counter the strength of the wind; but eventually I got it. I spent quite a bit of time that vacation scooting back and forth in front of the beach on the windsurfing board. I didn’t look like the guys on the videos, but still I felt like I did pretty well (better than Mom, anyway).

We’re in a series we are calling “Wind and Fire.” It’s a series on the Holy Spirit. And the question I want us to think about throughout this series—I introduced it last week—is: If the power of the Holy Spirit were missing from our church, would we notice? Are we aware of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our church?

After the resurrection, Jesus told His disciples that He would be leaving them, but that they should wait for the Holy Spirit. **Acts 1:4-5:**

**4**On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. **5**For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized withthe Holy Spirit.”

Last week we said that the word translated Spirit comes from the Hebrew and Greek words for wind. It’s one of the Bible’s images for the Spirit—you can’t see the wind, but you can see the effects of the wind. Here, it’s as though Jesus is telling His followers not to do anything until the wind of the Spirit catches their sails.

The disciples might have been tempted to ask Jesus: “But how will we know when the Spirit arrives? How will we know when He catches our sails?” And if they had asked that, I can imagine Jesus answering: “Trust me. You’ll know.”

Acts chapter 2, then, is the story of the Holy Spirit’s arrival. A day we know as Pentecost. And, trust me, when the Holy Spirit showed up, they knew.

***A Bewildering Commotion***Let’s look at the story. **Acts 2:1-4:**

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2**Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3**They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4**All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

We know from Acts chapter 1 that after Jesus’ ascension back into heaven, there were about 120 believers (Acts 1:15). Following Jesus’ instruction to stay in Jerusalem, they were spending their time together in an upper room (possibly the same upper room where they celebrated the Lord’s Supper on the night before Jesus’ death).

We think of Pentecost as a day on the Christian calendar (because of this story). But it was actually a Jewish holiday, one of the three biggest holidays on the Jewish calendar (along with Passover and Tabernacles.) The word Pentecost means "fifty" and it was celebrated 50 days after Passover. (We also know, incidentally, that Jesus spent 40 days on earth between His resurrection and His ascension, Acts 1:3. Since Jesus died and was raised again on Passover weekend, we know the Holy Spirit arrived 10 days after Jesus returned to heaven.) Pentecost was both a celebration of the Firstfruits of the wheat harvest as well as the anniversary of the day God gave the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

Now it is also going to be known as the day the Holy Spirit arrived. **Verses 5-8:**

**5**Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **6**When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. **7**Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? **8**Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?

On a day like Pentecost the mix of languages in Jerusalem would have been great. In the last 400 years, the Jewish people had been scattered all over the known world: from Egypt to Mesopotamia to Asia Minor and Greece and Rome. With the recently rebuilt temple, it was a goal of every God-fearing Jew to return to the land of their ancestors at least once in their lifetime, and the high feast days were the perfect occasion.

And then, in the middle of what would already have been a hectic day, there's this commotion at an otherwise non-descript two-story house. It's the sound of wind--the sound of a violent tornado, actually--even though there's not a cloud in the sky. The people on the street hear the wind, but they don't feel anything.

Everyone moves toward the house--where the sound seems to be the strongest--and they see people with what appear to be flames upon their heads coming out of the house. There's about 120 of them, and even though their heads are on fire, they don't seem to be alarmed.

In fact, instead of running after water or calling out in pain, they start talking.

And here's the strangest thing of all--these people from a house where the wind howls but can't be felt who are covered by fire which burns without burning--start talking in all the languages of the world!

I'm not quite sure how to describe it, but apparently these folks came out of the house and started talking in different languages. I'm guessing some started speaking Latin while some started speaking Arabic and others started speaking Egyptian and so on, and the people whose language was being spoken just gravitated towards the people whom they understood. Or, maybe, each one started talking and, depending upon who was standing nearest them--that's the language they spoke. I'm not sure, the text seems to indicate both: they talked “in other tongues as the Spirit enabled” (v. 4) and each one “heard their own language being spoken” (v. 6). But what is clear is that everybody there--both the transplanted Jews who had come back to Jerusalem from all over the world, as well as the pilgrims in town for the feast--everybody there heard the wonders of God proclaimed in his or her native tongue.

Moreover, the people who were doing the speaking were--by and large--Galileans. Now, that probably doesn't mean much to you, but if you had lived around Jerusalem back then you would know--like everybody did--that Galileans tended to speak with a strange accent that made it very difficult for them to learn new languages. They had a tough time with gutturals--their "g's" and ""k's"--and tended to swallow syllables. They just didn't strike you as world travelers.

So, naturally, everyone who saw and heard this was amazed. **Verses 9-12:**

 **9**Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10**Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome **11**(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” **12**Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

***Descriptive or Prescriptive***“What does this mean?” It’s a good question. And it’s a question we’re still asking today.

This is obviously an important day in the history of Christianity. Jesus promised that after He left, the Holy Sprit would come. That’s why He told the disciples to wait. Pentecost is the day that promise was fulfilled. The Holy Spirit arrived in a noticeable and impactful way.

But we still wonder what it means. Notably, we wonder if the things that happened on that first Christian Pentecost are the sorts of things we should expect to still happen today.

There are some who would say: “Yes, the things that happened then still happen today, and Christians should seek similar experiences.” We might say that these people read the book of Acts in a prescriptive way. That is, they see this story as prescribing experiences all Christians should seek.

Specifically, they say that Christians should seek a “baptism in the Holy Spirit;” or a deeper, post-conversion, filling with the Spirit. Afterall, they say, the people in this story were already believers, but they needed to wait for this deeper experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

And the mark of this Holy Spirit baptism, they say, is the gift of speaking in tongues. In some churches, Christians are encouraged to practice speaking in tongues; and if you don’t, it can be taken as a sign that you don’t yet have the Holy Spirit in your life.

The other option is to read this story as descriptive, but not necessarily as prescriptive. In other words, we recognize that Acts is a history book describing a very specific event. In this case, that first Christian Pentecost was an utterly unique and unrepeatable event.

These disciples *did* already believe in Jesus without the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives—but that is because the Holy Spirit had not been poured out yet. After this moment, once the Spirit has arrived, it would appear that the Spirit enters a person’s life as soon as that person believes in Jesus. In fact, that’s exactly what Peter says will happen at the end of his Pentecost sermon, at the end of this chapter. **Acts 2:38-39:**

**38**Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39**The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

There’s nothing here about a second baptism. Nothing about a later filling with the Spirit. Instead, the indication is that if you repent and get baptized in the name of Jesus—which implies identification with Jesus and trusting Him for forgiveness—then you will receive the Holy Spirit.

And, as for speaking in tongues, what happened in Acts 2 does not really correspond with the speaking in tongues that some Christians practice today. What we see in Acts 2 is the supernatural gift of languages. It’s clear that the disciples were able to communicate and be understood in languages they had never spoken before. The practice of speaking in tongues today is more of a private prayer language; it is a matter of letting one’s vocal cords run free as one lifts one’s heart to God in prayer and praise. We may have the opportunity to talk more about speaking in tongues later in this series; but for now, suffice it to say that what Christians mean today by speaking in tongues is not the same as what happened on Pentecost.

I take Acts 2 as being descriptive more than prescriptive. I don’t think we should be looking for a second baptism in the Holy Spirit, and I don’t think every Christian must speak in tongues in order to prove the Holy Spirit’s presence. I believe Pentecost was a unique moment in history.

***The Holy Spirit’s Purpose Statement***
But the question still stands: What does Pentecost mean for us? What does that first Pentecost tell us about the ministry of the Holy Spirit? For an answer, we need to look at how Peter responded to the crowd that day. **Acts 2:17-21:**

**17**“‘In the last days, God says,
    I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
    your young men will see visions,
    your old men will dream dreams.
**18**Even on my servants, both men and women,
    I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
    and they will prophesy.
**19**I will show wonders in the heavens above
    and signs on the earth below,
    blood and fire and billows of smoke.
**20**The sun will be turned to darkness
    and the moon to blood
    before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
**21**And everyone who calls
    on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

I think of this passage as the Holy Spirit’s mission statement. This is the explanation for why the Holy Spirit has been poured out into the world. Peter is quoting from the prophet Joel here, specifically Joel 2:38-32. This is a prophecy that anticipated the first Christian Pentecost. And it is the answer to the crowd’s question. They wanted to know what was going on, they wanted to know what the wind and the flames and the languages meant, and Peter got up and told them. He said, in essence: **God is pouring out His Spirit on His church in order to bring salvation to the world.** That was his explanation at Pentecost. God is pouring out His Spirit on His church in order to bring salvation to the world.

The key verse here is the last one, **verse 21:**

**21**And everyone who calls
    on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

This is the end goal of everything, this is where it is all leading. God's plan is to pour out His Spirit on His Church so that people will learn the name of the Lord and call upon Him for salvation. God's plan is to bring people into a position to glorify His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the Holy Spirit's role. He comes to fill Christians to enable them to tell about Jesus so that other people will call upon the name of the Lord and be saved.

From the Bible's opening pages you see people drowning in sin. From Adam and Eve and their feeble attempts to cover themselves to the people of Noah's day and their wickedness before God to the Israelites in Exodus and their incessant grumbling and mumbling to the days of the Northern Kingdom and their appalling idol worship, the whole of Scripture is a sordid tale of humanity's lostness. Pick a character--any character in the Bible, from Abraham to Moses to David to Paul--and you'll see that the one thing we have in common with them is that we are all sinful. All of humanity is drowning in sin.

But Jesus came along to save us. Like a Red Cross lifeguard He dove into the midst of our human sinfulness and He provided the means for us to be rescued. The name of the Lord is the life preserver whereby we can be retrieved from our sinfulness and assured of an everlasting life.

And the Holy Spirit’s role is to help people see and grab that life preserver. 1 Corinthians 12:3 says that “no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”

As Christians, we have been tasked with telling the story of Jesus. It’s a huge responsibility. But we don’t carry this responsibility alone. The Holy Spirit has come into the world to help insure the good news of Jesus will be published far and wide. The Holy Spirit's role is to empower Christians to make this message of salvation in the name of the Lord known.

***Every Believer, In the Last Days***That's what God is doing. That's what Pentecost means.

But there are two more parts to this explanation which fill in more detail. Because there is a democratization taking place here, as well as a sense of urgency.

First, we are told that God is pouring out His Spirit on all kinds of people. God's Spirit is not limited to people of a certain gender, or a certain age, or a certain social station. **Verses 17-18:**

**17**“‘In the last days, God says,
    I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
    your young men will see visions,
    your old men will dream dreams.
**18**Even on my servants, both men and women,
    I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
    and they will prophesy.

In the Old Testament--indeed, throughout all of history prior to this Pentecost day, the Spirit came to only a select group of people--and then only for a short amount of time. Kings and prophets and other leaders would sometimes speak or act in the power of the Spirit, but most of the people of God did not have personal access to the Spirit’s dynamic power.

But all of that changed at Pentecost. Now every follower of God has access to the Spirit. Now all Christians are vessels prepared to receive the overflow of God’s power.

That's why these different groups of people are mentioned. Sons and daughters means the Spirit will not discriminate by gender. Young men and old men are singled out so that we know the Spirit does not come with age restrictions. Servants are included so that we can see that Christianity is not limited to certain social classes.

The point is that every Christian now has access to the Holy Spirit. He's not just for preachers. He's not just for those who have gone to church for 50 or more years. He's not just for men or for women or for the rich or for the poor or Americans or Israelites or whatever. He's a worldwide Spirit who speaks all kinds of languages and comes to all kinds of people. And now, today, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have access to this Spirit.

And the second thing we need to see is a sense of urgency. God is pouring out His Spirit in the last days. God is pouring out His Spirit before the great and glorious day of the Lord. **Verses 19 and 20:**

**19**I will show wonders in the heavens above
    and signs on the earth below,
    blood and fire and billows of smoke.
**20**The sun will be turned to darkness
    and the moon to blood
    before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

These are kind of scary verses, and they are meant to be so. In the Old Testament prophets, the "day of the Lord" is a sort of Biblical shorthand for the end of the world. From a New Testament perspective, the countdown to this day of judgment began when Jesus died on the cross. Ever since, we have been in the last days anticipating His return.

What verses 19 and 20 describe then are some of the cataclysmic, terrifying events that will mark the end of time. Plagues, natural disasters, changes in the heavens and more will accompany Christ's return to judge the living and the dead. For those who serve Him, it will be a great and glorious day indeed. But for those who do not, the implication is that it will be terrible beyond all imagination.

And the point being made here is that God is pouring out His Spirit in preparation for this second coming. Follow the logic: God's plan is to pour out His Spirit to enable Christians to make the message of salvation in the name of the Lord known. He is carrying out that plan by pouring out His Spirit on all kinds of Christians--on every believer. And He wants this plan to be pursued wholeheartedly because the end of the world is coming soon, and the alternative for those who don't know the Lord is an awful, terrible, horrible judgment.

Do you get a sense of the needed urgency here? God is making His Spirit available to us so that we will take the life preserver of His name and go out to present it to those who are otherwise headed to a ghastly and grim end.

***For All Whom the Lord our God will Call***Finally, let me take you again to the end of Peter’s sermon on that first Christian Pentecost. **Acts 2:38-39:**

**38**Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39**The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

“All who are far off.” You and me are included in that group. It wasn’t just the people in the crowd that day who could receive the promised Holy Spirit. It wasn’t just for their children. It was also for all who are far off, those separated from Peter by thousands of miles and hundreds of years.

If you will repent and be baptized and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The life preserver of Jesus’ name will be given to you, and the Spirit will be poured out into your life.

And if you have already called on Jesus’ name; if you’ve already identified with Jesus; then the Holy Spirit is in your life to help you share this good news with others. We live in a world where we are surrounded by people who are headed for an eternity of damnation and hell. We all know people for whom this destiny awaits, unless something changes.

And we have the life preserver. We know the name of the Lord means salvation for any who will call upon it. And God is pouring out His Spirit on us--His church--so that the message of this salvation will travel all over the world.

That's what God is doing. That's what God wants us to be doing as well.