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Given by Rev Ellis F Andre

## When the Spirit Takes Charge . . .

Reading: Acts 2:1-21, 36-41

The sun had been up for almost three hours. At that time of the year, the air is crisp in Jerusalem, the skies are clear and the sun is bright. The city was bulging at the seams. Pentecost was one of the big three feasts and pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world were billeted in the city. Per square meter there were far more people in Jerusalem at the feast than there are in Vancouver for the Winter Olympics. They had come from far and wide to Jewish Feast of Weeks, fifty days after the Passover. It was a harvest festival at which they also celebrated the anniversary of the giving of the law at Sinai.

By eight o'clock in the morning, the city was pulsating with life. There was excitement in the air. These people enjoyed their religion and the crowds were filled with anticipation as they made their way towards the temple. It was to be a day of lively and colorful celebrations.

But the swelling crowds had no idea that something far more momentous was about to happen. They were oblivious to the existence of 120 people who had gathered, probably in a large house not too far from the temple.<sup>1</sup> They were doing as they had been told: waiting and praying.

### I. WE ARE ABOUT TO WITNESS AN AMAZING OCCURRENCE.

#### A. The Event

Luke's description is quite matter-of-fact. You don't need to dramatize an event like this.

1. All of a sudden, there was a loud sound, seemingly out of nowhere (Luke concludes, in retrospect, that it was from heaven). It was like the blowing of a violent wind. If you went by sound, it was as though a hurricane had blown into

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<sup>1</sup>Many believe that it was in the upper room in the affluent south-western part of the city where they had celebrated the Last Supper and subsequently met. Some believe this was John Mark's family home (Luke 22:7-13; 24:33-35; John 20:19-20, 26; Acts 1:13; 12:12). As we can see, they were in one place and this is described as a house. Luke sees no need to be more specific; to him, the exact location is less important than the events themselves.

the room. The ‘surround sound’ seemed to fill the entire place. Had it been an actual wind, it would have wreaked havoc. But this was “a gale” that did no damage.

This is not the first time in Scripture that the work of the Spirit is associated with wind. In fact, the Hebrew word for wind is *ruach*. And this same word is used for Spirit. At the very beginning, when God created, it was the *Ruach* of God who was hovering over the waters. In the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet is given a vision of a valley of dry bones representing Israel. The LORD says of those bones and therefore of Israel:

I will make breath (*ruach*) come into you and you will come to life . . .  
I will put my Spirit (*Ruach*) in you and you will live (Ezek 37:6, 14)<sup>2</sup>

So, appropriately, the coming of the Spirit is signified by the sound of a powerful wind.

2. Then it was as though the wind they could hear but not see turned into something visible. Suddenly, in the middle of the room there seemed to be flames of fire that looked like tongues. They dispersed and came to rest on each of those present. We cannot help but think of the times when God’s presence was manifested as fire. Do you remember the strange sight Moses saw in the desert: a burning acacia bush that was not consumed? And when God gave the law to his people, “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD descended on it in fire” (Ex. 19:18). Indeed, God is depicted as “a consuming fire” (Deut 4:24; Heb 12:29). *So here was a gale that did not destroy and a flame that did not consume.*
  
3. As those tongues of fire settled on each of them they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. An amazing thing happened, something that none of them had anticipated. When people were filled with the Spirit, it was not unusual for them to praise God. In fact, the praise pours from their lips. And prophecy often accompanies the filling of the Spirit. This is what happened to Elizabeth, to Mary, to Zechariah, to Simeon, and to Anna as they magnified the Lord (Num 11:25; 1 Sam 10:6; Luke 1:41-56, 67; 2:27-38). And this is what happened here. *But there was a difference. They praised God in languages they had never learned.*

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<sup>2</sup>There is also a relationship between the Greek words for breath, wind and spirit.

## B. The Reaction

1. By this time a crowd had assembled. They heard the loud noise.<sup>3</sup> This probably refers to the sound of 120 people praising God out loud. And they were flabbergasted. You see, these Jews and converts to Judaism had come from all over the Mediterranean world. The common language was Greek. Aramaic was also widely understood in the eastern regions of the empire. But in each region there were local dialects. And these Galileans, who had difficulty pronouncing the gutturals and tended to swallow their syllables, were speaking fluently in the local dialects of the regions from which the pilgrims had come. And from the text, it is clear that the multilingual crowd were not simply *hearing* their own languages; the Galileans were *speaking* in the languages.<sup>4</sup>
2. This elicited the bewildered exclamation: “Aren’t these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?” They were utterly astounded and said to one another, “What can this mean?”
3. As usual, there were some smart Alecs who made fun of them and suggested they’d had too much to drink.

So here we have this amazing scene. Wherever they were when the Holy Spirit descended, they have made their way to the temple. I think it is likely that they spilled out into the street and moved in the direction of the temple, collecting more and more people as they went. Now, here they are in the temple’s spacious outer court. Around them is a huge, bewildered crowd of people, some locals but also many visitors to Jerusalem. They have never seen or heard anything like it. Something really big is going down, but they have no idea what it is.

## II. THE SERMON

- A. Peter stands up, flanked by the other eleven apostles. He raises his voice and a hush comes over the crowd.

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<sup>3</sup>It *could* refer to the sound like that of a violent wind. We are not sure who heard that sound. One way or another, they came together.

<sup>4</sup>The text simply does not allow the interpretation that the 120 were speaking in Aramaic and that God performed a miracle of interpretation so that their praise reached the people from each region in their local dialect. The 120 are said to have spoken in *heterais glossais*-different languages. People in the crowd were expressing amazement, not that they heard each and every disciple speaking the language of their region, but that all these languages were being spoken so that people from each region were hearing their language.

B. Listen to this masterpiece of a sermon.

Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as some of you are assuming. Nine o'clock in the morning is far too early for that.

No, what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel,  
(Prophecy 1: Joel 2:28-32)

'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.  
In those days I will pour out my Spirit  
on my servants--men and women alike--  
and they will prophesy.  
And I will cause wonders in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below—  
blood and fire and billows of smoke.  
The sun will become dark  
and the moon will turn blood red  
before the great and glorious day of the Lord arrives.  
And everyone who calls on the name of the lord will be saved.'

(By this time, you could hear a pin drop)

DECLARATION I: GOD HAS RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD

People of Israel, listen to this:

*Jesus, the Nazarene, was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's prearranged plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*

David said about him:

(Prophecy 2: Psalm 16:8-11)

'I saw the Lord always before me.  
Because he is at my right hand,

I will not be shaken.  
 Therefore my heart will be glad and my tongue rejoices;  
 My body will also rest in hope  
 Because you will not leave my soul in the realm of the dead  
 Or allow your Holy One to decay in the grave.  
 You have made known to me the paths of life;  
 You will fill me with joy in your presence.'

(Peter then makes it clear that David could not have been speaking about himself).

Brothers and sisters, we all know that David died and was buried and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that God would not abandon him to the realm of the dead, nor allow his body to decay in the grave.

DECLARATION II: THE EXALTED JESUS IS RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT YOU SEE AND HEAR.

*God has raised Jesus to life, and we are witnesses to that fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and poured out what you now see and hear.*

(Prophecy 3: Psalm 110:1)  
 For David did not ascend to heaven and yet he said,  
 "The Lord said to my Lord:  
 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies  
 a footstool for your feet.'"

(Psalm 110 was regarded as a messianic psalm by teachers and people alike)

DECLARATION III: GOD HAS DECLARED JESUS TO BE BOTH LORD AND MESSIAH.

*Therefore let Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah.*

## THE SERMON WAS POWERFUL AND THE RESPONSE WAS DRAMATIC.

### A. “Cut to the heart”

1. When the people heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and all the apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”
2. This is Luke’s way of saying that the message had penetrated beyond the level of mere comprehension. They wore Peter’s accusation. We call this the conviction of the Holy Spirit. This is what happens when the Spirit of Truth he renders the message effective. He says: “This is true.” I have felt that conviction. And I have seen others in the grip of the Spirit as he convinces the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.

I can think of many but let me tell you of one. Actually, it involves an amazing chain of events. It starts with two young women working side by side at a commercial bank. The one had recently found the Lord and the other watched her life change. One day, she asked straight out, ‘What have you got that I haven’t?’ The explanation caused her to accompany her friend to church. There she found the Lord. She then asked her fiancé to come with her to church.

Her fiancé had grown up in a good Methodist home, but had never come to know the Lord personally. And life was looking really good for him. He was talented, good-looking, he had a wide circle of friends, and he was a first division rugby player. In that region, that made you a real hero. So he was admired. In addition, he was about to qualify as a chartered accountant. His financial future was secure. But his fiancée, Barbara, managed to get him to church. He attended every Sunday night for about a month. I did not know what was happening as the good news about Jesus was being presented. I subsequently discovered that he was experiencing the conviction of the Holy Spirit. As the truth was proclaimed, he was feeling drawn to surrender his life to Jesus. But for about five weeks he held out.

Then, on the sixth week, he sat and listened to the sermon and he felt nothing. He sat there smirking to himself. “I’m over it, he thought. Whatever this guy has been doing to make me feel like this has, at last, worn off. I can now come here with Barbara without feeling this pressure.”

At the end of the sermon, I asked the congregation to bow in prayer. As we prayed, it felt as though a gentle breeze blew from behind me. No, it was not

a literal wind, but I could feel God's presence almost as if it were in motion towards the audience. When I looked up, Peter had been moved to tears. He was crying like a baby. He had heard the truth for weeks, and possibly long before he ever came to our little church, but that night he was born again and the change was immediate. I could not help but think of Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

3. When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, the people were "cut to the heart." A skilled speaker may be able to manipulate an audience or motivate a crowd, but this was not guilt manipulation, nor was it mass hysteria. When the truth is proclaimed in the power of the Spirit, God changes hearts. It is they who ask, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

B. Peter's response did not leave them in any doubt.

**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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord your God will call.**

With many other words he bore powerful witness and urged them: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

Those who accepted his message were baptized and about three thousand were added to their number that day. What a response! Who could have foreseen this?

### III. THE IMPLICATIONS

This was a special day. In many respects it is unrepeatable. But he has never returned been retracted. And this has really important implications for us.

- A. The Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost *to take charge*. He is not a force that we unleash, nor an impersonal power that we harness, but a divine Person who takes charge.

1. This vital truth is implicit in the events of Pentecost. The disciples could wait as they were instructed to do. But they could not decide *when* the Spirit would come. Nor could they stipulate *how* he would come. They could not say, “We’ll have the fire but not the noise. Actually we’re Baptists and we like to do things quietly. We’ll have prophecy in Aramaic but not in the dialects of the empire.” No! That wasn’t their call.
2. I put it to you that he always does what is best. We may well find that he does something other than we may have planned. Suppose the apostles had sat down before the Day of Pentecost and planned an evangelistic outreach. They could have said, “Well, Jesus has ascended and we know, from what he has told us, that it is for us to announce his resurrection.” They could have asked, “How are we going to round up a crowd? Some might have argued, “That’s not the right way to go about things. We’re against mass evangelism. It’s far better to work in a low key way. And what can we do to indicate that God is doing a new thing. How will we convince them that we have actually seen the risen Christ?” Will they take our word for it since he is no longer here?” Those would have been reasonable-enough questions.
3. In retrospect, they could never have scripted anything like this. It was just perfect.
4. Come to think of it, he is God and we are not. Of course, I know this in theory. But in practice, I tend to forget it. This is a lesson we need to relearn. We don’t plug in to his power, run the church as we see fit and draw on his energy to accomplish *our* plans for the kingdom of God. So we start with his personhood and his sovereignty.
5. This will become even clearer as we proceed in our study of the book.
  - When Peter and John headed for the temple at the hour of prayer, they had not pre-planned a miracle. “Let’s find a forty-five-year-old man who has been crippled from birth and heal him. That’ll draw a crowd!” Obviously not! Although it is not expressly stated, it was at the prompting of the Spirit that Peter healed the man.
  - It was while they were praying at Antioch that the Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”
  - When the church faced the most difficult decision of its young life, James was able to say: “It seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .”

- It was the Holy Spirit who kept Paul and his companions from preaching the word in Asia. He wouldn't allow them to go into Bithynia either.
  - Whether it is explicitly stated or implicit in the way events unfold, the Holy Spirit directs operations
- B. So, we see him inspiring and empowering, but we also see him prompting, guiding, teaching and instructing. It is he who presides. When he empowers, it is so that we can do what he directs us to do. It would be absurd for him to play a subservient role in the church, showing up when we see fit, empowering us but not leading us, strengthening us but not teaching us, helping us but not changing us.

#### IV. WHY WOULD WE EVER WANT ANYTHING LESS THAN THIS?

- A. If it is true that he is God and knows what is best for us, for the church and for humanity as a whole . . .
- If it is true that only he can bring people to genuine faith in Jesus . . .
- If it is true that he brings honor to Jesus . . .
- . . . Then it is also true that when the Holy Spirit takes charge, Jesus gets all the attention. The Lord had said of him, "He will bring glory to me by taking what is mine and making it known to you" (John 16:12-15). Nobody is a better witness to Jesus than the Holy Spirit. Now isn't that what we want?
- B. For just a moment let's dream of what could occur in the Peninsula if the Holy Spirit takes charge. I'm convinced that we expect far too little. Perhaps we haven't seen enough, so when we hear someone dream great dreams, we are inclined to shrug our shoulders and say, "Not in the real world!" Or perhaps we've just got too used to asking God to bless our plans, to inspire our sermons, and to endorse our well-intended strategies. We may have lost sight of what can happen when, in practice as well as in theory, we recognize that he is here to be in charge.

#### Conclusion

At Pentecost, the Eternal Spirit came in a special way to direct the operations of the church. To empower us . . . yes! Most certainly! But he did not come as an impersonal force to be unleashed or a power that we tap into. He came to take charge. And when he does, as happened on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus gets all the attention.