

# Wind, Fire, and Forgiveness

Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day when the church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit in power upon the apostles in Jerusalem fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is a day of wind and fire and strange tongues and the fulfillment of ancient prophecies.

It is a day of salvation—a day where we remember and retell the story of the day that the church exploded into life, moving from the tight community of Jewish followers of Jesus to begin to incorporate people of every tribe and tongue.

Today is also the twelfth Sunday of COVID-time, a day when.... Well, when what?

It doesn't exactly feel like a day worth celebrating.

It's a day when, for the twelfth Sunday in a row we try to find ways to worship and connect and be the church in these days when we cannot be together in the same physical space.

It's a day when, for the twelfth Sunday in a row, "worship" consists of watching the fruits of the labours of a handful of people who speak and sing and pray into a camera on Friday night.

It's a day when, for the twelfth Sunday in a row we bring our anxieties and fears and disorientation and hope into the same virtual space and say, "God we need you, we need to hear from you! We need your Spirit to enliven and embolden and enlighten us during these strange hard times!"

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So, we have two different ways of locating ourselves and this Sunday in time.

We also have two texts that help us to inhabit both the time of the Christian calendar and the time in which we are living.

The first text is the well-known Pentecost story from the second chapter of Acts, the story of the Holy Spirit descending upon the early disciples who are waiting and expectant in Jerusalem, just as Jesus commanded them in Luke 24.

We have this spectacular imagery of tongues of fire resting upon the people, of strange and unexpected languages proclaiming God's deeds of power.

We see Peter interpreting the event for those present, linking the descent of the Spirit with ancient prophecies from the book of Joel and with the promise of Jesus himself.

We see the Spirit giving birth to the church.

It's a powerful text with powerful imagery. The Spirit's movement among the people comes via wind and fire!

It occurs to me that this may not be welcome imagery for many of us! Those of us who have spent any length of time in southern Alberta have perhaps made a grudging peace with the wind, but it's not something any of us particularly enjoy.

For me, wind means earaches and picking up siding that has blown off the side of my garage.

And what about fire? Well, we might think of warm campfires on cool evenings and wiener roasts and the pleasures of time spent outdoors.

But we're also only a few years removed from the devastating wildfires that tore through Waterton, a favourite place for many in our church.

Wind and fire often mean destruction and disruption. They are examples of threats in our world, of that which cannot be controlled or contained.

In Scripture, though, wind and fire are symbols of God's presence and activity.

God reveals himself to Moses in a burning bush (Ex. 3:1-2) and later descends upon Mt. Sinai in smoke and fire to continue the conversation (Ex. 19:18).

The prophet Isaiah writes that the Lord will “come in fire and his chariots like the whirlwind” (Is. 66:15-16).

Paul encourages the church in Thessalonica to be patient in their suffering for Christ will “be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire” (2 Thess. 1:7-8).

In Ezekiel, we see the prophet transported in a vision to a valley of dry bones and hearing, “Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (Ez. 37:9).

And Jesus himself, in John 3, says, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

Wind and fire.

Sometimes, they symbolize judgment. Sometimes they symbolize a dramatic encounter with God. Sometimes they are part of visions of the future. Sometimes they are symbols of punishment. Sometimes they are symbols of life.

Almost always, wind and fire are symbols of God and how God moves among his people.

Now, I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that most people listening to my voice this morning have never experienced God in ways quite as dramatic as tongues of fire and a violent wind.

This story may sound strange and sensational to our ears.

Even after Peter’s explanation to the crowd of how this is a fulfillment of an ancient prophecy from the book of Joel, even after he goes on to preach probably the most powerful sermon in history where he describes this powerful manifestation of the Spirit as the validation of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, as modern readers we kind of scratch our heads.

We’ve never seen God work like this. Perhaps the imagery alarms us.

Or, perhaps, we long for something like this—a clear, indisputable act and movement of God.

We long for God to explode out of heaven and take charge. To speak a word of truth and hope. To defeat evil and right wrongs. To lift up the oppressed and judge the oppressor.

We might think of the brutal racial injustice and subsequent violence that has gripped Minneapolis this week as the latest example of wrongs that demand to be righted.

We long for God to decisively silence all doubts and bend all reluctant knees.

We long for God to take from this planet the scourge of pandemics.

Yes, we would very much like to see tongues of fire and the violent rushing wind of God to sweep across our landscape and purify all that does not reflect God's purposes and intents.

We would love to see a powerful move of the Spirit to enliven and embolden the church in those places where its influence is waning, and its energy and conviction is fading.

We would love this in our own lives, too. We would love for God to just rush in and fix our problems, heal our wounds, restore our relationships, rid us of toxic habits and character traits that sabotage the lives we were created to live.

In Acts 2, wind and fire give us an image of the Spirit coming decisively, overpowering and overriding human fear and frailty, taking control even of human speech.

Some days, this sounds scary. Other days, it sounds like just what we and our groaning world could use.

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Our second text this morning also describes the giving of the gift of the Holy Spirit. We rewind a few weeks from the scene in Acts 2 to the day after Jesus' resurrection.

The disciples are huddled behind locked doors in fear. Sound familiar?

Of course, the object of their fear isn't a pandemic but the threat of reprisal from the Jewish religious leaders for their connection to their crucified leader.

In this scene, there are no tongues of fire or rushing winds. No strange tongues and powerful sermons.

Instead, the risen Christ just shows up. All of a sudden, he's just *there*, with his followers, his friends. He's just *there* saying, "Peace be with you. Peace be with you."

Those four words. Could there be any more welcome words in a time of crisis, disorientation, confusion, and fear?

Peace be with you.

And then... "I'm sending you to continue the work that I was sent to do." He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Again, no rushing winds, just a breath. The same God who breathed the breath of life into Adam in Genesis 2 now, in the risen Christ, breathes the Spirit of Life into his followers.

Go out. Bear witness. "If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

What on earth does this last part mean?

Is Jesus appointing his disciples as moral watchdogs of the world? Is he saying, "Whatever you decide about the merits of forgiving this or that specific sin, that's the final word on the matter?"

I don't think so. That would put far too much power into the hands of fallible and fallen human beings. It would also contradict much of what Jesus has said about forgiveness elsewhere in his teaching and ministry (i.e., "Seventy times seven" in Matthew 18).

I wonder if at least part of what he might be saying is, "From this point on, you, my Spirit-filled followers, are the way I am encountered in the world."

You are sent as I was sent. If you forgive as I have forgiven you, those you encounter will experience the healing and liberating power of God's forgiveness. If you don't, sadly, they won't. You will have allowed an opportunity to bear witness to God's forgiveness to pass you by.

That's one way to try to make sense of Jesus' words here. There are others.

But whatever Jesus meant, these words are a profound statement of our identity in Christ, of the incredible trust Christ has placed in us, and of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

It is a reminder of our gospel imperative to forgive as a way of bearing witness to Christ and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in and among us.

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So, two stories, two givings of the Spirit, two aspects church's call.

One characterized by fire and wind and public spectacle. One a private affair behind closed and fearful doors.

One to launch a church in power and to give the courage to speak boldly about the good news of the risen Christ. One to speak peace, to encourage, and to embolden the church to be the forgiveness of Jesus in the world.

The same Spirit is active and at work in both stories. God is no less present in everyday acts of love and forgiveness than he is the spectacular.

May the Spirit of the risen Christ breathe into us his life and enable us to enact his forgiveness in the world.

May the wind of the Spirit of the risen Christ fan the flames of our devotion to proclaim this good news.

Amen.

