

WE HAVE THE POWER!

A Sermon by Rev. Jessica C. Gregory

Acts 2:1-21

May 24, 2015~Pentecost/Confirmation Sunday

“Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life...” This oft used phrase was coined by character Rick Blaine in the classic *Casablanca* in 1942. In the film, these words refer to the regret that Ilsa Lund will experience if she does not leave Casablanca when she has the opportunity. However, the phrase can be used to refer to just about anything... maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest your life you will enjoy deep family connection. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life you’ll wonder what would have happened if you’d said yes instead of no.

Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow but soon and for the rest of your life you’ll be able to say your Chicago cubs won the World Series in the twenty-first century. The phrase is marvelous in its specific vagueness. It promises that something will happen without saying when it will happen.

Jesus could have used this phrase in one of his last conversations with the disciples. During the forty days after his resurrection when he returned to them, Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God and instructed the disciples to remain in Jerusalem. To wait for the promise of the Father. Jesus described: “...for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now....you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:5; 8).

Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You will have the power of the Holy Spirit. What hopeful note to leave his dear friends with. While the disciples don’t know exactly when, they know it will be soon.

And soon it was. Just seven weeks after Jesus’ resurrection the Holy Spirit came to the disciples in Jerusalem. It was the festival of weeks, later to be called Pentecost (as it took place 50 days after Passover), the third of three great festivals of Judaism. At this early summer festival, Jews offered the first fruits of their harvest to God. It was a festival of rejoicing and thanksgiving for God’s abundance. A major festival in their year, Jews came from places far and near to celebrate it in the holy city of Jerusalem. It was into this bustling metropolis filled with foreigners that the Holy Spirit came. As Luke begins the narrative in his Acts of the Apostles:

“When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place.”

While Jesus makes the promise of the Holy Spirit’s coming to the disciples, the “all” here probably refers to the disciples as well as the other Believers in Jerusalem mentioned in chapter one as being about 120 people. So imagine a very full house, with men and women and children sitting knee to knee on the floor. It is probably hot and stuffy, at times loud with many voices speaking. This community of Galileans, the minority in Jerusalem, has gathered for worship and fellowship. ²

“Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting.” ...Protected by Lake Michigan in the middle of America, it is rare that we hear fierce winds that accompany tornados or hurricanes, but I think that type of wind sound is what is being described here. A sound so loud your whole body trembles.

Add to this incredible noise the extraordinary sight of “...what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them.” And you have an unforgettable coming of the Holy Spirit.

The believers’ “sensory systems were flooded with adrenaline so that their minds and bodies intensely processed the sound, energy and feeling of the Spirit” (Feasting Theo) Not truly wind and fire, but sound and sights that give that impression.

The howling wind and flames alit above people’s heads; what a vivid impression of the Spirit’s presence!” Incredibly vivid, but transferrable to our everyday experiences with the Spirit? Perhaps not. As one confirmand wrote in her faith statement: “A concept particularly hard for me to grasp is the Holy Spirit.” I must agree. The Holy Spirit is very abstract. The Spirit is named in Scripture several times, but not described.

John chapter four states, “God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth and later in chapter six “It is the Spirit that gives life...” Paul refers to the Spirit too, in a passage we hear every year as we ordain officers: “There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit that gives them.” And in the second chapter of Galatians: “If we live by the Spirit let us also be guided by the Spirit.” We understand the Holy Spirit to be the third person of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God Present in and with the Church.

The last two weeks we have baptized children of God, welcoming them into the Church, surrounded by the presence of God through the Holy Spirit, believing the Spirit to be active in the sacrament. But still the question lingers, what IS the Holy Spirit? It is a force? Is it a wind? Is it a sound?

Perhaps it is all of these things and more. Presbyterian scholar and writer Donald McKim in his Dictionary of Theological Terms describes it this way: “The Spirit acts to incorporate all things into the life of God...the Spirit’s ability to enter into relationships with people makes it distinct from a force or an impersonal principle” (1996 131). The Spirit is God active in our lives, working to bring all that we do into God’s love, however that is possible.

Scripture tells us that with the Holy Spirit we also have the power to do things that we otherwise could not: “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak” (Acts 2:4). They, the community of believers gathered in that crowded house in Jerusalem, were a bunch of Galatians, a group notorious for their lack of linguistic talent. It was this group that was given the power to speak languages other than their own.

God is brilliant. What better time to have believers’ given the extraordinary ability to speak in foreign languages than when Jerusalem is full of foreigners? Full of people who need to hear the

good news of Jesus Christ? Full of people who could not help but hear the incredible sound coming from that crowded house filled with believers. Full of people who heard the gospel that day for the first time and joined the church right then and there, knowing its foundation was an incredible God. And so began the birth of the church.

We celebrate this extraordinary event of the coming of the Spirit; the howling wind, the flames atop the believers' heads. We hear the cacophony of languages in our annual processional; we sing hymns about the Spirit's arrival. We fill the church with red geraniums and drape the communion table with red paraments in red, symbolic of fire.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is awesome. But what is *as* extraordinary as the Spirit's coming is the *boldness* the Spirit gave the believers to talk about God's deeds of power. Remember, as Christians, the Galileans are the religious minority on a day in which Jerusalem is filled with Jews. No wonder the foreigners are surprised and bewildered, to the point of thinking the Galileans must be drunk, even though it's 9 a.m. The power of the Holy Spirit leads us to do things one would never expect us to do. And as the prophetic words from Joel asserts, God gives this power to *all* God's people, including each one of us. When was a time when you've been enabled by the Holy Spirit to do something extraordinary? I posed this question to two of our members, Kimberly Gartner and Michael Whitney and they are going to share their experiences with us now.

For all the wonderings we have about the Holy Spirit, there is no question that it is active among us, and that it actively works to bring us together as a community of faith. Just as happened at the birth of the church, each year on Pentecost, our faith community is broadened as new members join it. Through this school year, our seven confirmands have been nurturing and challenging their faith. Bi-monthly these young people paid attention to the Spirit's action in their lives. They questioned God honestly; they studied Holy Scripture; they shared prayer requests and prayed for one another; they laughed, and they discussed difficult theological concepts like the trinity and atonement with depth and thoughtfulness. In a completely counter-cultural act, these young people, moved by the Holy Spirit, are joining this church. They are committing to participating in its life as they serve the people of Appalachia, teach our children, worship with us, and attend challenge class.

They are professing publically their belief in Jesus as their Lord and Savior and their desire to grow in their faith by coming to church. And our Body of Believers becomes stronger, active in new and exciting ways, with the inclusion of these seven young people.

We celebrate the coming of the Spirit in this community today, less dramatic than its first coming, but just as extraordinary. Now just as then, young people and old are joining the church to be part of something incredibly special: a community bonded by a love of God, a desire to grow in faith and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do God's acts in amazing ways. With this Holy Spirit, we have the power to do incredible actions. We only need to have the courage to use it. May God, through the Holy Spirit, give us this courage, this day and always. Amen.

McKim, Donald K. 1996. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville: John Knox Press. 131.