

A Lightning Rod Instead of a Cross

Acts 2:1-21 & John 7:37-39

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Acts 2:1-21 (NIV)

¹ 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.

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 them speaking in his own language. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 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?" ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

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 heaven 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.'

John 7:37-39 (NIV)

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

A Lightning Rod Instead of a Cross

For just a moment, I want you to imagine a lightning rod on top of our church rather than a cross. On the Day of Pentecost lightning struck the early church. Not literally, of course, but figuratively. You remember the story. The closest followers of Jesus were gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. All the original twelve were there, save one. Judas' place had been taken by Matthias, who had been chosen by the casting of lots.

Jesus' brothers were there in the upper room. The resurrection had obviously healed some wounds because Jesus' brothers had been skeptical earlier of His ministry. Jesus mother Mary was there too. She was still pondering things in her heart, I imagine. Events too extraordinary for a simple Jewish mother to comprehend were commonplace now in her life. The agony of the cross was her agony as well as His. His resurrection was joyous comfort. Still, though wounds heal, they leave scars.

“The women” who had stood by Christ while He was on the cross and later were the first to go to the tomb on that first Easter morning were there as well. We do not know their names.

There they were — this motley band of earnest believers — men and women still shaken by the events of the past fifty days —saddened by the departure of their leader to “sit at the right hand of the Father” — and uncertain as to their fate now that He was no longer with them. Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem, and that is exactly what they did. They waited and they prayed.

Then, without warning — lightning struck. Actually, it was more like a small tornado: “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the same thing happened here today — in our church! I am not certain how we would handle it, if it did. Speaking in tongues has never been looked on with favor in our tradition. To tell the truth, neither has being filled with the Holy Spirit.

There is a wonderful story about a very dignified pastor who was visiting a lady in a nursing home. This lady was confined to a wheel chair. As the pastor stood to leave the lady asked him to have a word of prayer. He gently took her hand and in a somewhat perfunctory way prayed that God would be with her to bring her comfort, strength and healing.

When he finished praying her face began to glow. She said softly, “Pastor, would you help me to my feet?”

Not knowing what else to do, he helped her up. At first, she took a few uncertain steps. Then she began to jump up and down, then to dance and shout and cry with happiness that she was healed until the whole nursing home was aroused.

After she was finally quieted the solemn pastor hurried out to his car, closed the door, grabbed hold of the steering wheel and prayed a little prayer, “Lord don’t You ever do that to me again!” I can tell you that pastor never had his church struck by lightning.

It’s sad, but so often we expect so little out of God. Lightning could strike this church in the same way it struck on Pentecost. We could hear a sound like a mighty wind. Tongues of fire could rest on each of us. This church could become a vital and dynamic instrument of God’s power and purpose in our community. It could happen here, and I pray that it does! Indeed I believe it is God’s will that it happen! Our lack of faith is the only hindrance.

What are the characteristics of a church that is invaded by the Holy Spirit? Three characteristics are central.

THESE ARE POWER, VISION AND PRESENCE. LET’S BEGIN WITH POWER.

Jesus, in His final instructions to His disciples, told them to wait in Jerusalem “until you are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49).” That power would be the Holy Spirit at work in their lives.

The Day of Pentecost was certainly full of evidences of the Holy Spirit’s power. Simon Peter preached and 3,000 souls were added to the church. That’s power! But it didn’t stop there. In a relatively brief period of history, the tiny Christian community swept across the entire Roman Empire. Power was promised and power was delivered. The very gates of hell were threatened by the battering ram of God’s Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit is experienced, people walk with courage and confidence. No one asks, “Can we do this? Dare we try that?” Nothing is impossible to people who are led by the Spirit.

A certain husband wanted to cheer up his ailing wife. He went into the kitchen with the idea of baking some fresh bread. He gathered ingredients. On the counter he carefully assembled the flour, shortening, milk, yeast, etc.

Somehow, however, he misplaced the directions. So into the batter he added several packets of yeast — many times more than that called for by the recipe. After all, he reasoned, if a little yeast is good, a lot of yeast would be better.

A little later his wife called downstairs, “Honey, have you put the bread in the oven?” The distraught husband yelled from the kitchen, “In the oven? I can’t keep it in the kitchen! It will soon be all over the house!”

There is no sadder thing that can happen to a person, or a group of people, than to have a sense of powerlessness. “There is nothing that we can do,” they whine. Often they can do more than they think. If God is with us we can say to mountains, “Be moved....” and geologists will come from all over the

world to seek a rational, scientific explanation for the disappearance of a peak that once rose 4,000 feet above sea level.

Every study of growing churches indicates that the attitude of the congregation is the most important ingredient in the vitality of the church's witness. If we believe that it is God's will that we should be a church that is alive and growing and serving the needs of people, then we will be. It is not simply the power of positive thinking. It is trust in a promise — "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and you shall have power..."

THE SECOND CHARACTERISTIC OF A CHURCH THAT IS INVADED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT IS VISION.

God declares through the prophet Joel, "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. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."

Everything great that happens in life begins with a vision. The land we inhabit was founded on a vision. Young Henry Clay of Kentucky was one of those visionaries. It is said that, on his way home from his duties in Washington, he stepped from the stagecoach, bent down, and put his ear to the ground.

"What are you listening for?" inquired the driver. "I'm listening for the tread of unnumbered thousands of feet," said Clay, "that will pass this way westward."

Part of the power that the Spirit brings is the ability to see visions and to dream dreams. Part of the impotence of the church today may be our lack of vision.

Bruce Larson in his book *Wind and Fire* tells about a National Football League championship game many years ago in which Dallas was playing Green Bay in Wisconsin in what came to be dubbed, "The Ice Bowl." A few of our older football fans may remember that game.

Green Bay was behind five points, with just seconds to play. The Packers had the ball on the Cowboys' one-foot line and it was fourth down. Everything hinged on that last play. In the huddle the quarterback of the Packers, Bart Starr, turned to Jerry Kramer, the offensive guard and said, "Jerry, if you can move Jethro Pugh twelve inches to the left, you will make \$15,000."

Jerry Kramer caught a vision of what he was to do. Move defensive lineman Jethro Pugh twelve inches and collect \$15,000 — the winner's share of the championship. Jerry did exactly that. Jethro was moved. Green Bay won.

Can you and I visualize what it would require for us to make the kind of impact on our community that God calls for us to make? What would we need to do to minister to the needs of persons within the sphere of influence of this congregation if we were all God calls us to be? “Where there is no vision,” the Bible declares, “the people perish (Proverbs 29:18).”

Those of us who have been in the church for a long time need to be particularly on guard at this point. Sometimes people who were once visionaries can grow weary in well-doing and forget how exhilarating a vision can be.

There is a story about a primitive people who lived in a beautiful valley. As time passed, however, the soil played out. The number of wild animals thinned. Food was scarce. Life was hard.

Some of the young braves had heard that beyond the distant high mountains there lay another beautiful valley that had not been despoiled by human habitation — where the soil was still rich and the game plentiful. At much risk and with great courage, they climbed the high mountains, scaling each difficult precipice until finally they could peer to the other side. There lay the beautiful valley of promise. They went back to tell their tribe and soon all had made the pilgrimage to the new beautiful valley. There they lived in peace and plenty.

The years passed, however. The soil in the new valley began to lose its richness. Hunting became poor. Food was scarce. Life was hard. Word began circulating among the young braves that beyond a range of distant, high mountains there lay another beautiful valley that had not been despoiled by human habitation. They decided to climb the distant mountains to see if the reports were true.

But this time the elders of the tribe gathered and decided that sending an expedition to search for the new valley was simply too risky. They opted for caution. No expedition was sent. The ironic thing, of course, was that the council of the elders was made up of those who had once been the young braves responsible for seeking out the valley where the tribe now resided.

That can happen in a church, can it not? A church is begun by a group of young adults like Clem and Anna Studebaker who catch a vision of what their church can be. And miracles happen. The church grows. But then, with time, the church begins to slide backward. And another group of young adults want to try new things. And what invariably happens? The elders are resistant to change. So has it ever been. Where there is no vision the people perish.

POWER, VISION — BUT ONE THING MORE. PRESENCE.

Jesus had ascended to be with the Father. What would His disciples do now? He was the Way, the Truth, the Life for them. What would happen to the sheep without the shepherd? They were not to worry, Jesus told them. “I will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever... (John 14: 16).” That Counselor came like a bolt of lightning, like a mighty wind, like tongues of fire at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is Christ’s presence in the hearts of His followers.

W.W. Harking tells about a tradition that comes from the Creek Indians. According to this tradition, Tulsa, Oklahoma was named for old Tulsy Town in Alabama. Around 1828 the Native American inhabitants of Alabama were relocated to Oklahoma in the infamous “Trail of Tears.” On this sad journey Creek medicine men carried ashes from their sacred lands in the Old South to the new Indian Territory established by the US government in Oklahoma. From those ashes which they had carried over such a great distance the medicine men kindled a new fire in their new home which was at Tulsa’s present site.

That reminds me of a similar pilgrimage in the Old Testament. “Mose and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown (Lev 9:23-24).”

The fire that appeared above each of the believers on Pentecost was that same fire. After all, these followers of Jesus were the new Israel — the new bearers of the ancient flame. That is who we are today. We are not alone. God is with us. He has not left us comfortless, or powerless or without purpose. A mighty wind has roared. Tongues of fire have been kindled on the altar of God. We bear that flame in our hearts.

What are the characteristics of a church that is filled with the Holy Spirit? It has nothing to do with jumping over pews and shouting and crying and dancing in the aisles. But if that is your image of a spirit-filled church, there’s nothing wrong with such a joyous outburst of emotion. The characteristics of a church under the influence of the Holy Spirit are power, vision and a sense of the presence of God! I am assuming that in your mind you are also including the love of Jesus since that is the foundation of everything we do in the church.

Lightning struck the early church! Let’s pray that it will happen again so that we too can move forward with power, with vision and with the assurance that God goes with us.

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