

“Birth, Wind and Fire”  
The Day of Pentecost - June 12, 2011  
Acts 2: 1-21  
The Presbyterian Church of Dover DE

And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

Just imagine it! Just envision it! A tremendous wind rushing through the entire house where the followers of Jesus are gathered! Tongues of fire resting on each one of them! The Holy Spirit fills them and they speak about the mighty acts of God in languages they themselves have never even heard before! This racket draws many Jews who are in Jerusalem celebrating the Festival of Weeks, also known as Pentecost. To their utter amazement they hear these Galileans speaking their languages! They ask each other, “What does this mean?” Some say, “Surely they are drunk!”

But Peter, the senior pastor, gets up and interprets the event for them. He has had 50 days since Jesus ascended – 50 days to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. He has been studying, getting ready for this day. He has been looking at possible sermon texts from the prophets. He wasn’t sure *what* was going to happen, but he recognizes that what Jesus had promised has come to pass. He is ready to preach. He chooses a text from the prophet Joel. He preaches eloquently about God’s Spirit being poured out on all flesh. And later in the chapter, Luke tells us “and he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about 3000 persons were added.” Now that’s the way to start a church!!

Luke has told us quite a story here. What *does* this mean? What are we to make of this birth, wind and fire?

Tom Long, who now teaches preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, used to teach at Princeton Seminary. While at Princeton, he was discussing this text with students one day, when one student observed that this story reminded her of the little booklet one of the old saints in her home church had written about the history of the congregation. She said, "If you read (red) it, you would think that our church was the most loyal and faithful congregation in the world. Every minister was wonderful, and there was never a troubled moment." Long concluded that she was on to something. Luke is really the original local church historian!

This put me in mind of some local church histories I have read. The first one is the history of First Presbyterian Church in Maysville, written in 1950 – the year of my baptism. This wonderful little book was written by two maiden sisters – Miss Mary Wilson and Miss Florence Wilson. When I was *very* young, they were *very* old – but I remember them. Especially Miss Mary. Not only was she active in the church, on Saturday afternoons she would tell stories to children at the public library. Our parents would take us downtown to the library and we would sit at her feet, absolutely mesmerized by her storytelling. I can see her twinkling eyes right now.

Well, Miss Mary and Miss Florence organized this little history as many like it have been organized – by the pastors who served the church, and significant events in the life of the church during their service. Allow me to share with you a taste of their style of history. As we hear these little excerpts, keep in mind Luke's story of the Holy Spirit bringing the church to new life.

One of the pastors of the church was Dr. John Smith Hays, who served from 1886 to 1899, some thirteen years. He was much beloved by the congregation. Late in his time with the church he suddenly lost his sight and was completely blind. I quote:

“The blow was crushing and a man of ordinary faith and energy would have succumbed, but Dr. Hays committed his way to God and prayed for mercy and grace to enable him to submit to the manifest care of God without whose care the sparrow does not fall to the ground and by whom the hairs of our head are all numbered. The mercy and graced prayed for, came, and from that time until the end of his life he lived a cheerful and busy life.

It was remarked by some who heard him, that he never preached so well. Under this great affliction he continued to teach and preach. He was endowed with power by the Holy Spirit.

During his ministry, successful revivals were held, one of the most successful being conducted by a Rev. Dawson of Louisville. There were 51 conversions, many of them still active members. One entered the ministry.”

The subject of revivals is also taken up in another church history I have read – that being of First Presbyterian Church in Lexington KY. The first 175 years of the history of the church (1784 – 1959) were described by Rev. Robert Stuart Sanders. Let me share with you just one item from a section entitled, “Evangelistic Meetings.”

“In January and February, 1915 (that’s 2 months), Rev. Dr. J. Ernest Thacker of Norfolk, VA, held a meeting in a tabernacle (that’s a tent) especially built for the purpose. The tabernacle cost \$1,600. There were 100 persons in the choir under the direction of Mr. George A. Fisher. There were three services on Sunday, Feb. 7, when 2,000 people were in attendance. During the meeting 1,600 signed cards stating that they desired to live more consecrated lives. About 400 persons were added to the churches. This meeting was sponsored by all of the Presbyterian churches in Lexington.”

We are talking here about Presbyterians having a tent revival! Downtown next to the courthouse! Of course, the fact that 1,600 people responded to the moving of the Holy Spirit by *signing cards* proves they were really Presbyterians!

I would be remiss not to quote briefly from our own history, *Bridge Across the Years*, (1975) by Mrs. Aline Ehinger. When this very sanctuary was dedicated in April of 1924, the congregation came together beginning on Easter Sunday and every evening of that week – every evening! – to hear a sermon from a guest preacher, sing hymns, offer prayers. The week culminated with the annual congregational meeting on Friday evening, April 25, 1924. Mrs. Ehinger wrote:

“The members were encouraged by the report to Presbytery which showed that the church membership had increased to 142 communicants with 95 members in the Sabbath School....they were determined to embody as a church what Mr. Thomas Grier Murphey (who served as pastor here from 1844-1860) embodied in his life – the word of our Lord, ‘I come not to be ministered unto, but to minister.’” (p. 231)

In the year 2011 we respond to these excerpts much as we respond to Luke’s story. “Really?” “Sounds like sentimental nostalgia to me!” No. Events happened – events that are remembered by these local historians, not with journalistic precision, but with ... faith, love, and most of all, hope. And the hope is theological. It’s about God. It’s about what God has been doing through the power of the Holy Spirit, and what the church hopes for in the future. The local church historian describes a church’s past not in terms of cold hard facts, but in terms of *where* the church *trusts* that its Lord, through the Holy Spirit, is taking it. For Luke, for the Wilson sisters, for Rev. Sanders, for Mrs. Ehinger, the church is a sign of the kingdom of God. They look not only backwards, but forwards with a vision of God’s future. Old men (and women) dreaming dreams!

What if we were the local church historians? Some of us probably already are. But what if all of us were? Would we be able to identify and describe the movement of the Holy Spirit in our congregation? Some things would come to mind fairly quickly: housing and feeding the homeless, youth mission trips, Habitat for Humanity. You can

probably name many others. But sometimes the Holy Spirit moves in our midst in ways we hardly notice, or if we do notice them, they might not seem worthy of the history pages. But they are worthy. You can probably think of many such instances if you take time to reflect, and I encourage you to do so. In my brief time here I have sensed the movement of the Spirit in worship, in fellowship, in church school, in mutual care-giving, in generosity, in prayer, even in session meetings!

But if we are to be true local church historians in the tradition of Luke, we must also trust the Spirit to inspire our vision of the future. With Peter, we look to the prophet Joel – “God declares: I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young people shall see visions, and your old people shall dream dreams.” If our older people were to dream dreams of a church open to God’s future, what might they see? Might they even envision the church as Luke described it after the Spirit came at Pentecost – unlimited devotion all around, reverence and awe upon everyone, the freedom to share possessions, unbounded good will, and the church embracing all manner of people? If our young people were to see visions about a church open to God’s future, what might they see? Might they envision a church where everyone attended church school, a church where everybody sang, a church excited about the mission of not only the local church but of the larger church, a church where the pledges were oversubscribed? Just imagine it! Just envision it!

Sisters and brothers, we cannot afford to be cynical about the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. While the Protestant Reformation had a lot to recommend it, much of the rich tradition regarding the Spirit was lost. We are slowly recovering that. We

21<sup>st</sup> century Presbyterian Christians are especially wary of this wind that blows where it chooses, not bothering to behave decently and in order. But the Holy Spirit is nothing less than God present and active in our midst. As theologian Elizabeth Johnson puts it, the Holy Spirit is God who arrives. One of the great church fathers from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Basil of Caesarea, offered this encouragement: “Let us not be afraid of being too extravagant in what we say about the Holy Spirit; our thoughts will always fall short.” Of course, there were great church mothers, too, but they didn’t get published. One finally did after a time. The medieval theologian, Hildegard of Bingen, spoke of the Holy Spirit in glowing and feminine terms: “The Holy Spirit purifies, absolves, strengthens, heals, gathers the perplexed, seeks the lost. She plays music in the soul, being herself the melody of praise and joy.”

We cannot be cynical about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as individuals and as a community of faith. Without the Holy Spirit playing music in our souls, we are simply a voluntary association of people who get together periodically – much like a social club or a civic club. No, we are the body of Christ - the church – children of God – inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be a sign in this world of God’s future.

May our lives be witnesses to that truth. Amen.