

David W. Lloyd: The Power Of The Holy Spirit

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Seekers Church

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The Power Of The Holy Spirit

Today is Pentecost, the traditional day marking the Church's beginning. We hear this passage from the Acts of the Apostles every year. This is the day that we particularly reflect on the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the day that we are brought face to face with evangelism, a topic that makes some of us squirm.

During this last term of the School of Christian Living, I led a study of the Book of Acts, which I realized I had never formally studied in the School of Christian Living in all my years at Church of the Savior and Seekers Church. I hope it was a good experience for the others in the class. I found new depths in the stories that I had heard many times before, especially in the Sunday School of the Presbyterian Church of my childhood and youth. We noted how the author of Luke was also the author of Acts, and how his Gospel and Acts provide a summary of Jesus' life and teachings that non-Jews could embrace, an explanation of the growth of this offshoot of Judaism throughout the Mediterranean, and a suggestion that Roman political authorities need not persecute the group. We noted some parallel structures between the two books, how some signs and wonders in Luke performed by Jesus are repeated in Acts by the Apostles and Paul.

In preparing for today I have been struck by the beginnings of the two books. In the beginning of Luke a messenger of God's

word – in Greek, an angel – prophecies the birth of John the Baptist, a man full of the Holy spirit who will bring back many Israelites to the Lord in preparation for the Lord's coming. Then a messenger of God, Gabriel, tells Mary that she will bear a son, Jesus, who will be King of the house of Jacob forever. When Mary goes to her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is pregnant with the future John the Baptist, Mary bursts out that God's actions will put the arrogant of heart and mind to rout, pull down monarchs from their thrones, and send the rich away empty, but will lift the humble high, satisfy the hungry, and show mercy to the children of Abraham forever. Moreover, when Jesus is born a messenger of God appears to shepherds – a stand-in for all the Jews of lower socioeconomic status – and proclaims that the Messiah is born to them.

At the end of Luke's Gospel both John the Baptist and Jesus had been executed. Jesus had not only not failed to become earthly king of the house of Jacob, but the arrogant of heart and mind were still there, monarchs still sat on their thrones, the rich still had plenty, the humble were still lowly, the hungry were still unsatisfied, the children of Abraham still felt that God was unmerciful. True, Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. And the disciples had come to understand two different parts of scripture: those scriptures that pointed out that the Messiah had to suffer death and those scriptures that pointed out the Messiah's name was to be proclaimed to all nations to bring forth repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Acts begins with the post-Easter Jesus continuing to teach the disciples, now called apostles, a word that means commissioned messengers. In addition, we can tell that they are impatient to leave Jerusalem and begin spreading his message. Nevertheless, he teaches them to wait until they are baptized in the Holy Spirit, which will come in a few days. Then he had ascended to God. The apostles, now numbered about 120, including the women who followed Jesus, his mother, and his

brothers. They pick a replacement for Judas, and wait. This is a remarkable act of faith, this waiting, under the circumstances. Their teacher no longer appearing to them, the suspicion of the Temple and Roman authorities still present, they waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit came in the form of a noise like a strong driving wind. Here in the Washington area we have all experienced strong winds that precede a weather front, and bitter north winds during winter. Several weeks ago, I accompanied Sharon on a business trip to Las Vegas. One afternoon the sky clouded up, and the wind blew the desert dust into the city in increasing gusts. I was at the hotel pool, and the wind blew grit into our drinks, forced people to cover their faces and propelled dried palm fronds from the poolside trees like lethal missiles. Later on our trip, we were camping at Zion National Park. Every night at about 11 the residual heat on the canyon floor rose, and cool air from the canyon walls rushed down, swaying the cottonwood trees and threatening to inflate our tent so that it would pull out of its pegs and blow away. It was so hard to sleep that we resorted to sleeping pills.

There is a seasonal wind that blows through the Holy Land after Passover, a wind that can become a storm wind sometimes strong enough to blow down the Cedars of Lebanon. In the Hebrew Scriptures, such a wind is a sign of God's presence, especially a sign of God's judgment. It is also a sign of God's creation, overcoming the chaos of the beginning of the Genesis story. By telling us about the noise of wind coming to the apostles, Luke is telling us that the apostles are in the presence of God, and that God is about to create something from chaos again.

The Holy Spirit came in the form of tongues of fire. Most of us have felt the warmth of a campfire and its ability to provide us with a feeling of comfort and peace. We have all seen the destructive power of fire either in person or on TV

and in the movies. As part of our recent vacation, Sharon and I had reservations to camp at the north rim of the Grand Canyon. When I checked the Web a few days before we left, I discovered that the National Park Service had closed the lodge, the campground, and the major scenic drive due to a planned forest fire that had gotten out of control, not unlike the fire that threatened Los Alamos, New Mexico. I viewed the photos on the Web with concern and tried to make alternate plans in case the area remained closed when we arrived. Fortunately, the area reopened, and we had a wonderful time camping. I must say, though, that it was disconcerting to pass handmade signs directing the fire fighters to hot spots, to drive through stretches where the fire had crossed the road, to see and smell smoke from smoldering piles of brush, and to estimate whether blackened trees were tall enough to topple and block the road.

In the Hebrew Scriptures fire is a frequent metaphor for God's presence, whether it is at Abraham's covenant, Moses' burning bush, the pillar of fire by night and the flame on Mount Sinai for the Israelites, Elijah's altar on Mount Carmel and the ever-burning fire on the Temple altar. In fact, the Feast of Weeks of which the Day of Pentecost was part, a thanksgiving for the harvest and an offering of first fruits, began with the burning of a male lamb, as required in the Leviticus portion of the Law. Fire appears in the visions of last days of several prophets – Isaiah, Joel, Micah, Zechariah, Malachi and Daniel. Moreover, it is a potent symbol of God's punishing destruction and purification of humans' evil. In this metaphor of the tongues of flame, Luke is telling us that God is present and that the last days are beginning with the purification of God's people.

Jerusalem was crowded with Jewish pilgrims coming to offer first fruits for the Feast of Weeks. Many were from Judea and Galilee, and spoke Aramaic. However, Jews had also settled throughout the Mediterranean. Their primary language was

Greek, although probably with a local accent and incorporating words from local languages. It is reasonable to assume that the apostles began telling everyone in their own regional variant of Greek of the great things God has done. And the people were amazed and perplexed; some thought they had been drinking.

Then Peter stood up and his message was simple. Come worship with our community. We are multigenerational, including children and the aged, and we are inclusive to people of all sexual orientations. We really support each other as we try to live out God's call for each of our lives.

No, Peter's message consists of six statements:

1. the Apostles' linguistic abilities were one of the prophetic signs of the last days,
2. the day of the Lord is coming,
3. everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved,
4. Jesus of Nazareth, whom you used heathen men to kill, was raised by God to life again,
5. Jesus was exalted to God and received the Holy Spirit,
6. Jesus is the Lord and Messiah.

When they asked what they should do, Peter had a simple answer, repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. Moreover, he promised that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Three thousand did that day. In addition, their lives, and the lives of the apostles and other believers, were changed forever.

That is the story of the Day of Pentecost. However, where does that leave us 2,000 years later? Seekers Church is a community in the midst of great change. Our congregation is aging – almost all of our children will graduate from high school within a decade, and if we divide the voices in the litany between those under 40 and those over 40, we hear the

imbalance. We are losing a remarkable saint from the leadership team, Sonya, whose enabling, supportive leadership style has been one of the primary glues that hold us together. Moreover, we are losing Manning, whose supportive hospitable style has been a glue that we frequently have failed to recognize. Manning has been an unofficial mentor to me for a quarter of a century, and his courage in battling Parkinson's disease has mentored all of us. Moreover, we will be leaving the building that has been our home, to locate in another part of D.C. at the risk of potentially losing some Virginians.

I have talked to a number of people who are not in our congregation about our proposed move. Several things always seem to strike them. First, that the whole Seekers congregation has been invited into what the Stewardship group has called "spirit work." In the initial consideration, in the after-worship discussions, in the overnight discernment process, in discussions, in the calling forth of small groups, in financial contributions and pledges, in sermons, and in lots of prayer, we have all been invited to, and pretty much all of us have tried to, engage with the Holy Spirit for guidance. We have not merely entrusted the leadership team and the Stewards to make the decision for us. Second, that the whole congregation has been invited into a dialogue with our architect into the design of the interior space. Again, we have not left the design up to leaders or to the Building Development Team. Third, that we have begun engaging with the Takoma community prior to the move through the Community Links Team. Finally, that we are willing to be transformed as a congregation through all this. Through the Outreach Ministry and the Spiritual Grounding Teams, and the group working with the Leadership Team, we are using this time of change to allow the Holy Spirit to reshape us. I think we should be praying without ceasing our thanks to God for this remarkable approach.

We Seekers proclaim ourselves an Easter people and a Pentecost

people, and I think that is true. We can cite resurrection experiences in our lives, and experiences of the Holy Spirit. We have experienced the Holy Spirit that brought forth an unbidden "ah" of appreciation during prayer or music or dance in our worship, the warm feeling of rightness when someone spoke a deeper truth than he or she knew, the tears of joy or pain when we are touched.

Recently, my daughter Erica was telling me about a friend who is an evangelical Christian. He actually asks people if they have accepted Jesus as their personal savior. Erica said that she cannot do that, but she does talk about her faith with other young adults. I know that Erica and I are alike in this. I talk to lots of people about Seekers Church and about my call and my faith, and listen to theirs.

I pray for a Holy Spirit that keeps me in community with you – the other 120 apostles – and with the whole Church. I do not pray for a Holy Spirit that not only breathes an "ah" but blows with a roaring noise, a Holy Spirit that not only warms my heart but burns me uncomfortably, a Holy Spirit that so emboldens me that others think I am drunk at nine in the morning. However, I think that I ought to pray for that bigger Holy Spirit.

I want to be clear here. I am not suggesting that we pray for the emotional signs of the Holy Spirit. They may come in many different forms. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that we be open to a more powerful Holy Spirit, one that makes you and me uncomfortable, one that may change our lives forever. I suspect that if we do pray for the full power of the Holy Spirit, Seekers Church will be changed in surprising ways. The Spiritual Grounding team would become overwhelmed by a new vision of centeredness. The Stewardship Team would be presented with so many gifts and pledges that we can dramatically increase our financial giving for ministries. The Outreach Ministries Team would discern a new corporate call for Seekers, and calls for new mission groups to implement it.

The Community Links Team would be swamped with requests for Seekers' collaboration with community organizations and businesses, resulting in the Building Management Team having its hands full managing the activities that used all the rooms of the building every day.

Wow! Moreover, perhaps scariest of all, the Holy Spirit would change our message. We would not be talking to others merely about the Seekers Community. Instead, like Peter, we would be saying a simple message:

1. these signs of the Spirit in Seekers are one of the prophetic signs of the last days,
2. the day of the Lord is coming,
3. everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved,
4. Jesus of Nazareth, whom the powers of evil killed, was raised by God to life again,
5. Jesus was exalted to God and received the Holy Spirit,
6. Jesus is the Lord and Messiah. And thousands would repent, be baptized, and join our number.