

## ***Careful What You Ask For!***

Day of Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

### Acts 2: 1-21

There is certainly no better proof that Jesus was who he said he was than the before-and-after pictures of the disciples. Before Pentecost, they were dense, timid bumbler who fled at the least sign of trouble. Afterwards, they were such powerful witnesses that it was said of one of them, Peter, that his mere shadow passing over a sick person could bring healing. Before Pentecost, these disciples were fickle followers who couldn't even stay awake while their Master was praying. But afterwards, they became fearless leaders of this movement; healing the sick and casting out demons; going to jail where they sang hymns until the walls came down around them. How did this transformation occur? Today we hear and celebrate how it all happened.

The last thing Jesus told his disciples to do before he ascended into heaven was to go back to Jerusalem and wait there for God's promise to come true. They would be baptized by the Holy Spirit, he told them, and they would be clothed with power from on high. Although they had little or no idea what any of that meant, they did as they were told. They went back to Jerusalem – not to the temple, but to an ordinary room in an ordinary house – and there they waited, along with the women who had come with them, including Jesus' mother.

We don't know much of what they did while they waited there. We know they prayed and, I imagine, at least some of them were asking God to tell them a little bit about what they were waiting for. How would they know when the power had fallen on them? Would it hurt? How did the Spirit go about baptizing people, exactly? And what about this fire Jesus mentioned? That sounded dangerous, to say the least. Maybe they should have some water handy in case things get out of hand.

Well, they didn't have long to wait to get their answers. On the day of Pentecost, a Jewish festival set fifty days after Passover, they were all together in one place when they got a crash course in power, real power. First, there was wind, then there was fire, then they were filled with the Holy Spirit and overflowed with strange languages – one spoke Parthian, while another spoke Latin, and two others found their tongues curling around the exotic sounds of Egyptian and Arabic.

They may not have known what they were saying, but the crowd they drew sure did. Devout Jews from all over the world stood listening to a bunch of Galileans tell about the power of God in their own tongues so that no one was left out. It has been commented upon that the list of people and languages present that day was a catalogue of the whole Roman empire, and, I suspect, Luke, in telling this tale, is telling us that God's Kingdom encompasses all that was known, despite differences of nationality and tongue. The Holy Spirit, as it turned out, was a phenomenal linguist.

And still it baffled them all. On that fateful Pentecost, they were in the grips of something that bypassed reason and some of them could not bear it, so they started hunting for a reason. "They are filled with new wine," someone commented. "They

were drunk," is what they were saying. But Peter said, "No, these are not drunk, after all it is only nine o'clock in the morning," implying, I suppose, that if it had been a bit later in the day there may have been an issue.

Be that as it may. Someday I'll venture a sermon on that, but not today. What happened next was that Peter, the one who denied even knowing Jesus at that crucial hour of his trial, delivered a sensational sermon, based on the prophet Joel. The Holy Spirit, he told them, is being poured out on them and this is how it looks: wind like the wind that revived the valley of dry bones from Isaiah's time, and fire like the fire that led Israel through the desert with Moses, and tongues like the tongues that erupted at Babel, but in reverse this time. Human speech, through the power of the Spirit, has now been made intelligible to all. It is Gospel; it is good news and everyone present could understand it.

It must have been some sermon for Luke records that three thousand people were baptized that day. It was a miracle. And, it was the birthday of the Christian Church, when a dozen bumbling Galileans received power from on high and proceeded to turn the world upside-down. What happened in that fateful upper room spread from Jerusalem to Athens to Rome to Alexandria and beyond. It spread across nations, across centuries, across cultures. Think about it – because of what happened in that room, people who did not speak a word of Hebrew have come to believe in a Hebrew Lord, who is worshipped today in every language on earth.

And it happened by the power of the Holy Spirit, which scripture talks about, and we know, in at least two ways. First, as the abiding presence of God in Christ who is promised to us in our baptisms and who resides with us all our lives. This is the Spirit who brings comfort and peace when we are troubled. This is the Spirit of love and concord, or compassion and presence, who comes to us in the anxious and troubled moments of our lives.

But, let's be clear about this, there is another way the Spirit acts. This is not another Spirit, mind you, but another manifestation of the same Spirit. And, it is not nearly so comforting. This is the Spirit who blows and burns, howling down the chimney and turning all the carefully placed lawn furniture upside-down. Ask Job about the whirlwind, or Ezekiel about the chariot of fire, or those disciples about that first Pentecost in that room, or anyone who has been captured and released by this Spirit and had their lives changed and forged and moved by God's Spirit. As one seminary professor I know said, as he reminds those studying for ministry and who feel they've received a call to serve: "When God calls you, He's not doing you a favor."

You see, the disciples were not drunk with new wine; they *were* the new wine – the new wine of God's power turned loose in the world to preach about a Kingdom where forgiveness is the order of the day, love the motivation for all actions, and service to others the marching orders we all receive.

I don't think I'm alone when I say that there are times when I want a protective umbrella when the Spirit comes raining down with wind and fire and disrupts my ordered world. As Rector Alan Jones, dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco once commented: "Only a fool would pray for the Holy Spirit. And only fools for Christ do." He goes on to say that "the Spirit is most present at three open spaces in our lives: in

the unpredictable, in the place of risk, and in those areas over which we have no control.”

I wish there were more time for us to explore that insight, but let’s just note that this is where the disciples were that day; and it is where we find ourselves more times than we are willing to publicly admit, not only as individuals, but also as members of this Body that was born two thousand years ago. It is certainly no crime to pray for the Gentle Spirit to be in our lives, but Pentecost is our reminder that there is another Spirit loose in this world – one that can set us on fire, transform our settled lives, and turn the world upside-down and inside-out.

I read an interesting insight on this Acts passage. The writer commented: “The disciples risked ridicule and retribution by proclaiming the gospel message out to the crowd. They took a chance and believed that the authority and power of the Holy Spirit would work through their words. It was a profound risk. But that moment of proclamation brought into being the church as the new creation of God.”

And then he concluded his remarks with this challenge: “There is no safety in safety; there is only safety in the risk and dare of a life of faith. Faith is but another word for ‘risk.’”

As this church moves into a new era of witness and service, it is that same Spirit that will guide, comfort and challenge you. A church in transition, like you are at this very moment, needs to know and understand that your future is secure in God’s hands, because His Spirit is among you – guiding the deliberations of the Call Committee, working with the Congregation Council and all the committees and organizations in this place in their continued leadership of this people of God, even walking beside me, as I seek to be open and responsive to that Spirit’s guidance and insights in my role as your interim pastor. God’s Spirit is always out ahead of us, leading, guiding, taking us to new, exciting and scary places. But we need not fear, that same Spirit will be with us to give us strength, courage, wisdom and comfort. I know it because I’ve felt it and known it throughout my life and ministry, and I know you have, as well, in your life and history as a faithful community of faith known as Trinity Lutheran Church. AMEN.