

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 15, 2016
Pentecost Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 104:25-37
I Corinthians 12:4-13
John 20:19-23

It had to be one of the most dramatic events in all of history. The Holy Spirit comes to a room filled with believers in Jerusalem, and fills them with passion and fire. Shouts of joy and praise are emanating from all directions.

People are gathered in Jerusalem from every persuasion and city, every nation and province, and they find themselves glorifying God in amazing ways. They are speaking in a variety of foreign languages, yet they understand one another. They are a multitude of voices, yet they are still in one accord.

The text reveals to us a scene of raw power, of a “tornado like” storm, of bright flames of fire descending down and filling the room, of a miraculous speaking and hearing. The Holy Spirit has come. And the Spirit has come with great power – on Pentecost.

Now, power can be used in at least two ways. It can be *unleashed*, and it can be *harnessed*. The energy in ten gallons of gasoline, for instance, can be released explosively by dropping a lighted match into a gas can.

On the other hand, the energy in that gas can be channeled through the engine of my small car in a controlled burn and used to transport me almost 400 miles.

Explosive bursts of power are spectacular and can be magnificent to watch. But *controlled* burns have staying power, and often more durable and lasting effects.

I believe the Holy Spirit works both ways. At Pentecost, the Spirit exploded onto the scene in a demonstration of raw power. His presence was like “tongues of fire.” Thousands of people were immediately affected by this explosive, singular burst of divine power.

But the Spirit also works another way. He works over the long haul, in a more enduring and somewhat less spectacular fashion. He meets needs. He changes lives. He continues Jesus’ work. And he does it through *us*, the Church, the organism which God began in order to tap the Holy Spirit’s power for the long haul. He manifests his power through us, his people, as we gather each week for worship, and as we are sent forth into the world to serve.

Now, don’t misunderstand. I am certainly glad for the “explosive” bursts of power which the Spirit of God is working throughout our world, and perhaps even in our lives and families.

But on this Pentecost Sunday, I am also glad for the fact that God has given the Spirit **to the Church** for the long haul, for the rough-and-tumble and ordinary activities of carrying on the work of Jesus in the world.

As we saw last week, Jesus admonished the disciples to wait patiently for the Spirit, and to hunker down for the long haul of continuing his work while awaiting his return. And while Pentecost certainly was a dramatic and explosive demonstration of power, it certainly did not stop at that. For the Spirit came in order to lead and guide the Church over the long haul, to carry on her task until Jesus returns.

In the past, Pentecost has been somewhat hard for me to celebrate, in part because I think I have longed for a repeated occurrence of that explosive power that happened on that day.

But the day of Pentecost, as marvelous as it was, was a unique and one-time event. And as such it is unrepeatable for us. From the day of Pentecost onward, the typical way that persons receive the Holy Spirit and enter the Church is through their baptism. Our baptism *initiates* us into the Church and the Spirit, and the Eucharist *nurtures* the life and work of the Spirit in us. In this way, then, we experience the “controlled burn” of the Spirit in our lives over the long haul.

As we prepare to enter into the long season of Kingdomtide, our recessional hymn for today captures the essence of what I’m trying to say:

*Come, O Spirit, dwell among us, come with Pentecostal power;
Give the Church a stronger vision, help us face each crucial hour.
Built upon a firm foundation, Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone,
Still the Church is called to mission that God's love shall be made
known.*

*We would raise our alleluias for the grace of former years;
For tomorrow's unknown pathway, hear, O God, our humble prayers.
In the Church's pilgrim journey you have led us all the way,
Still in presence move before us, fire by night and cloud by day.*

Do you hear the petition behind these verses? It is a prayer for God to empower us with the Spirit *for the long haul*.

Explosions are great, and fun to watch. But the channeling of power and the harnessing of power over the long haul is no less miraculous. In fact, in some ways, it might just be more miraculous.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us come raising our own "alleluias" for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us give thanks to God for his awesome power in all of its manifestations, whether it comes as explosive bursts of power or whether it comes harnessed through God's people over the long haul. And let us open ourselves anew to the possibilities of the Spirit's work in our lives and in our congregation.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.