

"What the Spirit Does"
 a sermon preached by
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, WV
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Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

- 24 O LORD, how manifold are your works!
 In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
- 25 Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
 creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.
- 26 There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
- 27 These all look to you to give them their food in due season;
 28 when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
- 29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
- 30 When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.
- 31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works –
 32 who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.
- 33 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
- 34 May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.
- 35b Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD!

Acts 2: 1 – 24

- 1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.
- 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,
 and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.
- 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.
- 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages,
 as the Spirit gave them ability.
- 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.
- 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.
- 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"
- 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?
- 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,
 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,
 11 Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."
 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"
- 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."
- 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them,
 "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.
 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.
 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

- 17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
- 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
- 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire,
and smoky mist.
- 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the
Lord's great and glorious day.
- 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.
- 22 "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you
by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you,
as you yourselves know—
- 23 this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God,
you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.
- 24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him
to be held in its power.

Today, this Pentecost day, is a day of hope and possibility. A day when we are reminded that God can, and does, surprise **even** the most seasoned disciples.

Whether you have been following Christ for two days or eight decades, God still calls us forth, out into the world, together, to speak in the languages of people, and testify to the love of God, the power of Jesus Christ.

A day when we realize that we can't take training wheels into the life of discipleship, following Christ isn't something we can do partway. We have to trust God, and go.

If we are willing. If we are paying attention.

On that first Pentecost, the disciples who were together in "one place," praying and waiting while the town around them celebrated the spring harvest.

They were there, together, in that place because Jesus had told them to do that. Just one chapter ago, before he left them, Jesus "ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father."

And what did they do while waiting? As we heard last week, they prayed. Professor Jack Levinson writes¹:

Jesus' earliest followers stayed put. They prayed. They prayed a lot. There is nothing fancy, nothing fabulous here. But there is something important: Jesus' dearest friends didn't fill Jerusalem with frenetic activities, even good ones. If they'd been out and about, they wouldn't have prayed the way they did. Life would have been too

¹ This portion of the sermon is a re-phrasing of the ideas in Jack Levinson's article, "Pentecost for the Rest of Us" posted on Huffpost on 5/26/12 at 2:43 P.M.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jack-levison/pentecost-for-the-rest-of-us_b_1540129.html?view=print&comm_ref=false
Retrieved on 5.26.12.

busy, too hectic, too frantic. They chose to start by hunkering down for a long night's prayer.

It is into this community that the Holy Spirit arrived. *Sound, like the rush of a violent wind.* Not actually a violent wind, but like. *Divided tongues, as of fire,* appeared on their heads. Not actual fire, but as of fire.

As one scholar said, "It is as if not even the most lavish use of human language is capable of capturing the experiences of the day...."

It is more than they could have imagined possible. And it doesn't just come to **some** of them. It doesn't even come to **all** of them, it comes to **each** of them and sends them forth.

The Spirit sends them forth to proclaim. To speak in other languages.

This is not the gift of speaking in tongues described elsewhere in the Bible, speaking in a unique or special language known to only a few, requiring translation.

This is speaking in the languages of others. The telling of God's deeds of power to others so that they could understand. **So that they could understand.**

And maybe this is even greater than the spirit's arrival like a wind and as tongues of fire. God doesn't expect us to understand God's language, God doesn't tell us that that others need to learn our language. God comes to everyone in their own dialects, in ways each can understand.

The birth of the church is marked forever by this proclamation—we are not to call others **to** ourselves and to our own ways.... We are to go **out** to others, and to find ways for God's good news to be understood.

Even greater than the wind and the flames was the power to speak in the languages of others. Even greater than speaking in the languages of others was the God which their words described. The message of God's deeds of power. God's love and mercy, hope and promise.²

On that Pentecost day, as the word was proclaimed and the Good News was received. 3,000 that day, we're told, believed and were baptized. 3,000.

The church, on Pentecost, is born, but it is not yet completed. That is the same today as it was almost 2,000 years ago.

The Spirit is still coming, **to each of us**, calling us to go, to speak, to be understood, to understand.

Today. Pentecost. We are reminded that God is not done with us. God is not done with the church. And we are the ones. We are the ones being called to wait and pray, and then go, sent by the Holy Spirit. Changed forever because of the love of God.

² David Bartlett, commentary on the first reading for workingpreacher.org
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching_print.aspx?commentary_id=71
 Retrieved May 25, 2012.

It can be intimidating. A little overwhelming. And I can't speak for anyone else, but sometimes I feel like I'm not grown up enough for the tasks God has for me. I want more time. I want more help. I don't think I'm ready to go it alone. I feel like I'm the kid on the bike with training wheels while the real disciples race around the track on their ten-speeds.

But that's not what the text tells us. The message of Pentecost **isn't** that we are supposed to watch those disciples follow Christ, the message is that **WE** are the ones being called by the Holy Spirit to follow Christ and proclaim God's deeds of power in ways that can be understood.

The message of Pentecost **is** that it is time to take the training wheels off and ride on our own two wheels.

Maybe we feel we might fail, and failure is unacceptable.
Or maybe we feel inadequate.
Or do we trust more in our busy-ness than the claim and grace of God?

Do we feel like we don't know the Bible well enough, do we tell ourselves that if we can just take a few more classes, and then we will be ready to really be disciples?

We aren't sure our prayers are the "right kinds" of prayers.

Or we just aren't ready to hand over our whole lives to God, and think we can keep something back for ourselves, something that gives us the illusion that we are in control.

Whatever it is that we tell ourselves is a good reason for thinking we're not like those disciples in Pentecost, that we need training wheels, that we aren't ready to ride on our own, these are not roadblocks sent by God, they are hindrances of our own creation.

Pentecost rids us of all our excuses and leaves us to reckon with the Holy Spirit, pure and full strength. And we are called to ride.

Did you know? The theory used to be that training wheels would help us learn. But not any longer. It turns out, training wheels don't help, they hold us back.

In a story on NPR a few years ago, Scott Simon reported:³

The latest revised revelation may be: training wheels don't help a child learn how to ride a bicycle. In fact, training wheels might postpone their progress by teaching a child to pedal rather than keep their balance. As... an MIT professor of engineering...[said this week], it's hard to see how training wheels can inculcate any of the desired balancing habits.... The San Francisco Bicycle Coalition and other groups around the country [are now discouraging parents from using training wheels, and instead] recommend that you just lower the seat of a two-wheeler and have your child push themselves along the ground.....

³ Teaching Kids Balance Can Be A Lesson For Parents
<http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=153075840>
Heard on May 19, retrieved on May 20, 2012.

Instead of providing artificial security, their program “freedom from training wheels” relies on nurturing a child’s natural sense of balance.⁴

And I wonder how much the disciples, gathered in that one place, were like children who are trying to ride their bikes, but afraid to let go of the assurance of those training wheels...who might have preferred to continue to rely on what they had already seen and heard instead of heading out into the unknown... trusting a God they could not see who appeared to them in ways too unbelievable for words to describe.

Maybe we’re like that, too.

But if we listen. If we pray. If we wait and open ourselves like Jesus commanded those disciples and us to do, the Holy Spirit does not leave us that option. We’re not told to wait until we get more training, we’re called to go.

We don’t have to know how to ride a bicycle before we ride on, we have to learn through trying...trusting in the gifts God has already given, and will continue to develop within us.

In the history of our own country, Washington and Hamilton didn’t start out as Washington and Hamilton, they started out as George and Alexander. And then George and Martha and Alexander and Eliza.

Or here at Old Stone, The Rev. Dr. John McElhenney didn’t start out that way. He started as John, and then John and Rebecca.

God does not call the equipped, God equips the called.

Where in your own life, where in your own faith do you continue to rely on training wheels, reluctant to let go, scared of what might happen?

Scott Simon, in his story on NPR, continued:

Most of us can’t recall our first steps. But the first few moments in which training wheels are removed and a child sits up on a bike under their own power, whizzing past trees, lampposts, and running dogs, can be a rapturous memory.⁵

I wonder if that’s what it felt like on that first Pentecost when the spirit came like a wind, as flame. Did it feel, for those first disciples, like the first time you set off on your bicycle, free, no training wheels, no hand on the back of the seat, streamers on the handlebars, blowing back in the breeze created by your pedaling?

⁴ Documents from the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition:

http://www.sfbike.org/?family_guide http://www.sfbike.org/download/familybiking/SFBC_FamilyBikingGuide.pdf

<http://www.sfbike.org/download/FFTW-Parent-Instructions-june2011.pdf>

All retrieved on May 26, 2012.

⁵ Teaching Kids Balance Can Be A Lesson For Parents.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=153075840>

I believe that the Pentecost miracle is not yet complete, and that the Holy Spirit is waiting for us, waiting for us to recognize it, whether it's like a wind or as flame or as something completely different but just as unimaginable, and go forth. Not because we are ready or prepared, but because we are called by God to go and be witnesses to the One who is greater than us all.

We need not fear.

God equips the called.

To feed the hungry
Comfort the grieving
Eliminate violence by the ways of peace
Challenge that which is wrong by showing another way
Surround the hateful with love
Be in relationship with one another
Care for one another, near and far
Rejoice with those who rejoice
Weep with those who weep
Conquer despair with hope.

Friends.

The Spirit is Calling.

Let's go.