

THE WINDS OF SURPRISE

I want you to picture with me, if you will, the city of Jerusalem, shortly after the crucifixion of Christ. On one hill stands the Temple, the most holy site in all Judaism. Close by lies the Fortress of Antonia, garrison for the Roman Procurator- what we would call the Governor, who history tells us was named Pontius Pilate. It is the dry season in Palestine; it's a hot and dusty time. People are gathering in Jerusalem for Pentecost. It is a happy time, for most people that is.

In a small house somewhere in Jerusalem, the Disciples are hiding. They are hiding because Jesus had commanded them earlier to wait there in Jerusalem. Some commandments Jesus had given were difficult to follow, but I suspect that the Disciples followed this command rather gladly. After all, think about what had happened with Christ's death. Christ was killed by the Romans for sedition, the Jewish authorities had accused him of blasphemy, and the crowd had simply been seeking blood. At worst, death awaited the Disciples. At best, they faced persecution for following Jesus, that "crazy Galilean". I imagine the Disciples were very content to wait in hiding.

I think what we have a tendency to get content too. We're content to wait for God to move- content to wait for God to do something. We believe it's okay to sit back rather than striving forward; we talk a good story, but we don't follow through. The Disciples are the same way.

What the Disciples don't know is that today is the end of the wait. The scripture says, "... and suddenly there came a noise from heaven like a violent rushing wind and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the spirit was giving them utterance. "¹

We don't talk much about the Holy Spirit in the Calvinist tradition. In our churches you won't hear much about it at all. If you go to seminary and study systematic theology, your discussion of the Holy Spirit will probably be limited. When discussing the doctrine of the Trinity, the professor will mention the Holy Spirit as the "also ran" as if to say, "Oh, yeah! By the way..." You might also hear something about the works of the Spirit, namely, sanctification and justification.

But if we are honest with ourselves, the truth is, Calvinists aren't very comfortable talking about the Holy Spirit because we don't really know what it is. We want to know what it is, not just what it does. The truth is that Presbyterians have a history of being control freaks, and the Holy Spirit can't be controlled. The Holy Spirit just does not act "decently and in good order" which is important for Presbyterians. The Holy Spirit just isn't respectable in that way.

¹ New American Standard Bible The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, CA. © 1995.

Furthermore, when we do get spiritual it looks very different from this. We have pictures in our minds of warm, fuzzy feelings associated with God's presence, long hours on our knees in prayer, and a sweet piety. Our ideas of the spiritual are probably more closely defined as dedication or loyalty to God.

However, the Disciples were very familiar with the Spirit, if only by means of tradition. When we find the spirit in the Old Testament it's not docile, but it's active. Our God is a God of action, and when Jews talk about God by telling stories they talk about the God who acts. The Old Testament is full of instances where God appears as a spirit. Usually, these appearances are in the form of a powerful natural force, often the wind or fire. Many times, God's glory has a "spin-off effect". The Spirit that empowers nature also empowers humans toward a greater end.

Picture that scene from the Ten Commandments where Charlton Heston is parting the Red Sea, and he's holding his arms outstretched, and the power of God is parting the Sea, and all of the Israelites are going down through the parted Sea. That's the way the Holy Spirit shows up. Now, I've got my own issues with that movie, but that part they got right. They pictured the Holy Spirit correctly. That's the way that it looks in the Scripture.

That's what happens here. God comes in the Spirit by wind and fire, empowering the Disciples. Now, I have to say, going back to the story of parting the Red Sea, if something like that happened today, somebody would complain saying, "This isn't in the bulletin. Nobody told you to do this. This hasn't been approved by the Session. You can't do this." That doesn't happen here, the Spirit shows up and God acts! The same thing happens in this story. God comes in the Spirit by wind and fire and empowers the Disciples. The Spirit is literally, as the song says, "blowing in the wind."²

The Westminster Confession along with its associated catechisms was adopted in 1648. Those of you who've studied the shorter catechism know that the first question asked is, "What is the chief end of man?" When that came out, in response many other Protestant Churches, noticing that Presbyterians did not kneel when they prayed, came up with a taunting chant that went like this. "Presby, Presby, will not bend. He just sits on man's chief end." I don't know about you, but I take that criticism seriously. It makes me realize that, for all my rhetoric and all my intentions, I've spent a lot of time sitting on my chief end.

Several years ago, someone said to me, if we just work on being spiritual, everything will work out. Well, I agree with that, but we need to take the spirit as it comes. If we concentrate on the Holy Spirit, be doing the Lord's work and things will go along swimmingly. We just have to remember that following the Spirit means following the Spirit that actually comes to us, which might be an active one. The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of action. The Holy Spirit leads to Discipleship, docility. The Holy Spirit leads to passion first. Peace is the result of the action that

² "Blowin' in the Wind" , Bob Dylan, Warner Brothers, © 1962

passion empowers. The warm, fuzzy feeling comes after the Spirit came- not before it or in place of it.

Now, I know that's hard. This church is descended from the Church of Scotland. There was a saying in the Church of Scotland, "Let there be no emotion in thy devotion." This power that we receive from the Spirit is not some warm glow that envelopes us like molasses. It's a strong, active, vital force- i.e., a whirlwind, fire, earthquake, lightning, or even a rushing wind. It's a force that inspires to do things that we never even thought possible.

One person said to me, "You know, Tom, I do think that the Holy Spirit comes quietly." I would say that's right, it can. I'm not saying that the Holy Spirit never comes quietly, but I will say that the Scriptural witness is that far more often the Spirit comes actively, passionately. If you're like me, what happened is you dismissed that immediately. It's a simple equation: emotion plus devotion equals irreverence. I say that because I was raised in the Presbyterian church. However, I'm forced to conclude that's not a biblical image.

Now, this story may not be surprising to us or even to the Disciples, because Jesus had promised to send the Spirit to them. Is this passage simply a reaffirmation of that promise?

I don't think so. Scripture says, "... there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout people from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in their own language. And they were amazed and marveled, saying, 'Why are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya and Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs (in other words the whole Roman Empire)- we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.'" And they continued in great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does it mean?"³ Like many of us they had so isolated themselves from the active Holy Spirit that they didn't recognize it when they saw it.

I think that there were three groups amazed by the wind and fire in Jerusalem that day. The first were the people, from whom we just heard. They were amazed because they had associated this kind of prophecy with the Galileans; that is, with Jesus and his Disciples. In the culture of first century Palestine, honor meant more than life itself, and Jesus had suffered the greatest shame imaginable- the death reserved for traitors, namely, death on a cross. Galileans, who were lower on the social ladder than Judeans, were believed the only ones crazy enough to follow someone like Jesus. Yet, people from all nations were prophesying here- including people from Judea.

³ NASB Lockman Foundation

Another group is also amazed by the wind and the fire- to the point of disbelief. The Scripture says “others were mocking and saying, ‘They are all full of sweet wine.’”⁴ They accuse the people of being drunk. The text doesn’t say this, but in my mind’s eye, I picture these men as the political authorities of the day. They’re trying to diffuse the situation in a desperate attempt to salvage their position. They’re trying to control the situation, but the Spirit can’t be controlled. It doesn’t work.

Then there is another group that, perhaps, is the most surprised. You see if the Holy Spirit had been limited to them, they could have claimed honor for themselves. But it didn’t work out that way. That third group that’s surprised, is a surprise itself. It’s the Disciples themselves. Those who had been told to wait, who had faithfully done so, were surprised by unfolding of the very thing for which they had united. Why were they surprised? Because it doesn’t come just to them. The Holy Spirit infuses the whole crowd. We didn’t just replace one group for another. This is for everybody. A choice awaits the Disciples; they can disavow their faith or take a stand and give honor to the God who is working in the Spirit through the wind and fire that day.

Peter wisely chooses the latter. He recognizes the hand of God in these strange occurrences, and claims honor for God not for himself. He offers scripture as proof. Listen now to the scripture. “But Peter taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: “People of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel; ‘And it shall be in the last days’ God says, ‘that I shall pour out my Spirit upon all humanity; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon my slaves both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of my Spirit and they shall prophesy. And I will grant wonders in the sky above, and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. And it shall be that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”⁵

Does that sound like a docile God? Does that sound like our God is a couch potato? No. Our God is active and calls us to be active.

Looking at the whole of this passage, it is fair to say that all were surprised by what was blowing in the wind that day. They were surprised because they learned something new about God’s working through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit cannot be contained or confined; after all, how does one fence the wind? The crowd learned that the Holy Spirit cannot be contained or confined by the constraints of a certain ethnic group. It says both Jews and Gentiles participated. The authorities learned that the Holy Spirit cannot be contained or confined by the constraints of the authority, whether that be church authority, or theological authority or

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

political authority. Imagine that... a priesthood of all believers. The Disciples learned that the Holy Spirit cannot be contained or confined by the constraints of being an original follower of Jesus. It's open to everyone.

The same principle is true today. The Holy Spirit cannot be contained or confined by the constraints of anything: no political, economic, social, religious, or ideological system can contain it. It cannot even be contained by our insistence on God looking the way we want. If we insist on that, all that will happen is that we will isolate ourselves from God. The Holy Spirit, like the wind, blows where it will. Where do you suppose the Holy Spirit might be blowing today? Where might it be blowing tomorrow?

Sometimes today it seems like we're hiding in the church; waiting for something good to happen, waiting for a break. If this true, then I suspect that when the Spirit of wind and fire blows across us it will be a surprising development from a surprising direction leading us to do surprising things that will help to transform a surprised world. In short, it will be a repeat of this story. It may not look exactly like it, but it's going to look crazy. Thanks be to God, that the Holy Spirit works in ways we don't understand, ushering in the Kingdom of the Living God, which liberates and surprises us all.