



LOOK WHAT THE SPIRIT CAN DO

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Acts 2:1-21

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O LORD, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Last week, I began my week with Sabbath. Seven other clergy from New York and I went to Stony Point Conference Center for a retreat. Some of you have heard me talk about this small group, because they are the unique NYC ministers with whom my husband and I meet with monthly and traveled to Israel two years ago. Thanks to the organization Macedonian Ministry¹, we were brought together three years ago to form a cohort—a group of ecumenical Christian clergy who would meet monthly to study Scripture, pray for one another, support our various ministry contexts, and travel together to the Holy Land. Our cohort includes one Roman Catholic priest, two Episcopal rectors, four Presbyterians from wildly different churches, and two Baptist ministers, one who began an immigrant Baptist church in the Bronx 30 years ago, and the other who is lucky enough to be married to me. We were with each other at the beginning of last week, because last week marks the end of our three-year journey together.

A good bit of our retreat was spent reflecting on how our time together has shaped each of our vocations. It was amazing to think of all that has happened to the nine of us in these three years! In fact, when we gathered for our first retreat at Stony Point, B.J. and I took our then 10-month-old son Elijah with us, and he is turning 4 next month. In those 3 years, two of our cohort changed ministry contexts, one

¹ <https://macedonianministry.org/>



moving into a conflicted church that was recovering from a recent split. One member of our cohort was ordained, with many of us present to lay hands. Three members of our cohort are closer to retirement. My husband B.J. completed his dissertation and earned his Ph.D., and I published my second children's book. Many of us have walked with our churches through construction projects, strategic planning, and fundraising. And each of us reflected on the transformational effect our trip to Israel had on our cohort and our own faith journeys.

With that many clergy in the room it was not lost on us that we were reflecting on our time together days away from the celebration of Pentecost. With all that has transpired over these last three years, we gave thanks for the presence of the Spirit and humbly said: look what the Holy Spirit can do.

The celebration of Pentecost gives each of us the chance to reflect and remember just what the Holy Spirit can do. In Acts 2, the Spirit arrives in Jerusalem and everything changes. Pentecost is a story of many nations, a cacophony of sounds, and a dynamic visual scene of fire and wind. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit falls upon everyone gathered in Jerusalem for the harvest festival. On the back of your bulletin today, you'll see where all of these people come from—from every corner of the known world at that time. Radical things are happening at Pentecost—multiple languages are spoken and understood, the wind is so loud that it fills the space, and fire lights the face of everyone gathered. This is what the Holy Spirit can do.

The proof of this radical change is Peter, the first amongst Jesus's disciples. Remember Peter? It was Peter who was rebuked as Satan for pulling his Lord aside and telling him to stop talking about his upcoming death. It was Peter who was rebuked for pulling a sword and attacking the high priest's servant at Jesus's arrest. And it was Peter who hid on the fringes of the crowd as Jesus was being interrogated, swearing not just once but three times that he did not know who Jesus was. Finally, it was Peter whom Jesus felt compelled to ask three times whether or not he actually loves him. "Do you love me," Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" And hurt by this questioning, Peter responds emphatically, "Yes Lord, I love you."



Peter has had wonderful moments in the stories of the Gospels, but he has also made terrible mistakes, doubting Jesus' power and rejecting his leadership. But here today we meet Peter again—the same man, the same height and weight, the same birthday—and yet...something is radically different. All of his history notwithstanding, the Peter we meet today in Acts 2 is somehow very much *not* the same man. And it's all because of the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost, after the wind, fire and languages, Peter—the doubtful, stubborn and fearful disciple—takes the reins. And because of the Holy Spirit, Peter is transformed, and he begins to preach. He stands bravely before the crowds and proclaims the arrival of the Spirit, quoting from the prophets and inspiring the people. Peter continues on for 15 more verses after the passage that Deborah read today. The Holy Spirit leads him with confidence, as he recounts the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the same city—and almost certainly before some of the same people—where he cowered in fear on the night of Jesus' arrest when he swore that he never knew his Lord. Because of the movement of the Spirit and the preaching of Peter, on that day 3,000 people were baptized! Just look at what the Holy Spirit can do. Peter is proof that everything has changed.

Today on Pentecost we have seen just what the Holy Spirit is capable of: the wind, the fire, the crowds, the baptisms, Peter and his great leadership—these are all evidence that the Holy Spirit is alive and well. But this is not just an ancient text for our hearing. We worship this same wild Spirit today. And if we pay attention, we'll see just what the Holy Spirit can do.

Look...look what the Holy Spirit can do—bring seven families into the church who are eager to baptize their children and welcome them into Christian fellowship. Look what the Holy Spirit can do—send 23 youth and adults from Brick Church off to Ohio next week for mission work to help families in economic need. Look what the Holy Spirit can do—expand our stewardship through the Doubles Challenge, encouraging more of our members to financially support the ministries of this church. Look what the Holy Spirit can do—members from our church and Park Avenue Synagogue will gather twice this summer for Bible study. Look what the Holy Spirit can do—our congregation and neighbors filled 92nd



street three weeks ago for food and fellowship, and we will continue this fellowship in the Garden during our summer barbeques. Look what the Holy Spirit can do—our friends at Church of the Living Hope in East Harlem are inviting us to engage in more intentional outreach through meals, gardening and ministry. Look what the Holy Spirit can do—all of this and more.

Preacher and theologian Tom Long compares the gift of the Holy Spirit to that awkward moment when a friend or loved one gives you a gift you don't quite understand.² When you receive the unrecognizable gift and unwrap it, you see their excited face but you don't quite know what to do with the gift. Long says, "There is something of the same uncertainty and perplexity, in a much deeper sense, about Pentecost... in dramatic fashion, something has been given to the church, a gift from God. But when we open it up, what exactly is this gift? The gift is the Holy Spirit, of course. On Pentecost, God gave the church the gift of the Holy Spirit... But when you take the wrapping paper off, what exactly is this gift of the Holy Spirit?" As we see in our own ministries here at Brick Church, the gift of the Spirit takes a variety of forms. But in many ways, it is still a gift we can't always explain.

Patheos, an online media source for religion and spirituality, challenged its writers and contributors in 2010 to describe the Holy Spirit in 100 words or less.³ Several of them contributed, and as I close this morning, I want to share one of the writings with you from a then seminary student. She tries to explain the confusing gift of the Spirit. According to her, this is what the Holy Spirit can do:

*In nudges and whispers.
Like a seed growing, imperceptible at first.
Like wind, invisible, refreshing, transformative.
Like water, cleansing, renewing, powerful.
Unpredictably. Uncontrollably.*

² http://day1.org/3822-whats_the_gift.

³ <https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2010/05/how-the-holy-spirit-moves-today#Amy>



*Praying: for us, with us, in us, through us.
Convicting, like a judge in a courtroom.
Comforting, like a mother with a frightened child in the middle of the night.
We know her work by experiencing it.
She will not be pinned down, can only be described with analogies.
But wherever there is forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, grace, she
leaves her fingerprints.
Always the one connecting, making us into the Body of Christ, God's hands
in the world.*

Friends, this is what the Holy Spirit can do. Make disciples, baptize babies, lead a mission trip, inspire outreach, education and fellowship—these are all gifts of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is our day to recognize the Holy Spirit's movement and join in her ministry.

Thanks be to God for the wild and wonderful work of the Holy Spirit. Amen.