

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, September 13, 2020

Hymns: 299 – Holy holy holy; 389 – Breathe on me, breath of God; Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God

Scripture: Acts 2:1-13; Colossians 3:12-17

Sermon Title: 16 Signs Intro – “Watch For The Signs”

Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

Colossians 3:12-17

As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The feast of Pentecost. The noise from the sky. The rushing wind. The tongues of fire. The excited voices. The words of a hundred languages. The bewildered crowd. The confusion. The amazement. The scorn.

These are signs. These are billboards, meant to awaken us to the astounding, exciting event taking place in our story this morning. The history of the Church was to begin right there, right then, right now, with the astonishing arrival of the Holy Spirit. And it all began with signs.

The Age of the Spirit of God is ushered in with rushing wind and tongues of fire. Why rushing wind? Maybe you remember Jesus and Nicodemus - that's the bit where we get the "You must be born again," line, as well as "For God so loved the world." John chapter 3. There's Jesus, attempting to explain the workings of the Spirit of God to Nicodemus, and he uses the illustration of Wind. "*Look, Nicodemus,*" said Jesus, "*You may not be able to see the wind, like you can the rain, or hold it in your hand, like the ocean, but you can most certainly feel it, as sure as it blows through the hair on your head, and you can certainly see it, as sure as the trees wave their branches in the air. And you know for certain that you can't make it blow where it doesn't want to, but that it can sweep you along just as the ships are swept across the sea. That is how the Spirit of God works, Nicodemus, just like that; just like the wind.*" Watch for the wind, Nicodemus. Watch for the signs.

And so what happens in our story this morning? A sound comes from heaven like the sound of a mighty, rushing wind, and fills the room and swirls about and sends the shutters banging and the curtains swaying and the dust up into the air. And if Nicodemus is there, among the 120 in the upper room – and he just might be - his hair is fighting a battle between being blown about by the fingers of a thousand invisible breezes, and standing straight on end, as he remembers Jesus' words - "*It's like the wind, Nicodemus - it's like the wind.*" But that's not all. There was also fire.

Even way back in the Old Testament, ever since the word Go, the presence of God has been associated with fire. And fire is not a bad way to get the point of God across. Fire gives heat, and light, and protection. Fire is a little bit mysterious, because it is not quite water and it is not quite earth and it is not quite ever the same from one moment to the other. Fire looks a lot like the sun, which gives everything the mysterious power it needs to see and grow. And, in spite of this, the one thing you must never do, is to play with fire. Because when you play with fire, watch out.

So fire was a good way to get the point of God across, and God used it a lot. You might remember the Burning Bush out of which God spoke to Moses, the mysterious fire that burned and burned. If you don't remember the Bible story you might remember the one with Charlton Heston, you can take a look at our church sign, and there's the bush again, the bush that burned with mysterious fire, that burned and was not consumed. So impressed were Presbyterians with this bush, that

our motto is *Nec Tamen Consumeatur*, “Yet Not Consumed.” The idea being that we burn with the fire of the Spirit, we're on fire for God, and yet we are not consumed, but carry on. An alternate translation is, “We're not dead yet!” which maybe I prefer.

But back to the tongues of fire, descending upon the people in our story - it is the unmistakable sign of the Presence of God, coming down to rest upon each one of them. They're on fire, but not consumed. The Spirit is HERE, says the Sign. The Spirit has COME.

Those in the room did not remain unaffected by all that was happening. Instead of hiding under the table, which would have been my reaction, they found themselves on their feet, arms raised to the heavens, shouting out in languages they had never even heard, let alone spoken. Imagine the room, one hundred and twenty people or so; imagine the wind, and the fire, and the laughter, and the tears. Imagine the joyous realisation that they had not been left alone, to despair, to perish, to wither away one by one until their story, the story of Jesus, was just a forgotten fantasy. Imagine the unspeakable hope which filled their hearts, as they realised what it all meant, that God was with them, the presence of God among them, empowering them even to speak out in all the tongues of the world.

They were not the only ones to be surprised, not the only ones amazed on that day. For outside on the street, the passers-by and the pilgrims had heard a commotion erupt from the second story of a normally quiet dwelling, voices shouting out in languages all could understand. The locals knew that most of those who gathered there were back-country Galileans, but the travellers who had come from all over heard the comforting sounds of their own languages being shouted from the housetop. And make no mistake; they were from far and wide - from all that was known of the whole wide world, way back then in Jerusalem.

Yes, they were from far and wide, yet each and every one of them heard, coming from that upper room, what must have seemed like the first open forum of the United Nations. Each and every one of them heard, in the words with which they grew up, stories “*of the great things,*” Luke writes, “*which God has done. The Gospel is for YOU,*” they shouted out, “*For you, and you, and you, and everybody, all over the world. The Gospel is for YOU.*”

“*Amazed and confused,*” continues Luke, “*the crowd kept asking each other, 'What does this mean?'*” And he also writes, “*But others made fun of the believers, saying, 'These people are drunk.'*”

You know, there's something in me that wishes the same would happen today. Not that people would accuse us of being drunk, but that we might just let our hair down enough someday to make those walking past outside stop and think. There's something in me that would love nothing more than a mighty, rushing wind blasting right through this place, blasting the bulletins right out of the pews, blasting us awake as only a brisk wind, correctly applied, can do. There's something in me that wants tongues of fire to dance upon our heads, setting us alight with an inner flame that does not consume, but that brings light and heat and energy and drive to our sleepy spirits. There's something in me that longs to see this place on its feet, shouting Hallelujah, and praising God with all the languages the United Nations can find. Hard to imagine, and even harder now, what with the ropes and masks and social distancing.

There are churches where such goings-on are not all that unusual; maybe not wind and fire, but plenty of Hallelujahs and the like. An important component of worship in the Pentecostal church, which takes its name from the Day of Pentecost event, as well as within other denominations known as “Charismatic,” is a physical, experiential move of the Spirit of God.

We Presbyterians tend to be a little more conservative in our worship practice. The Apostle Paul, when writing the church in Corinth, warns them against over-enthusiastic demonstrations of spiritual enthusiasm, ending his instruction with this (1 Corinthians 14:40) “...*but all things should be done decently and in good order.*” Presbyterians took that last line, and made it the cornerstone of our church government and worship style. And there's nothing wrong with decency and good order. But again, the occasional shaking up wouldn't be a bad thing.

But Paul has another good bit of advice up his apostolic sleeve. In the chapter to which ends with the “decently and in good order” bit, Paul comes up with an even more valuable line. He says, (1 Corinthians 14:12): “*Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*” And what might those gifts be? Let's go back to our friends, the Colossians, and the letter written to them which we intercepted, and see what Paul has to say:

As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

(Colossians 3:12-17)

If you've heard of a better recipe than this for the ideal church, go there. And quick. Let's make an inventory of the evidences of the presence of the Spirit of God that Paul outlines, just in this single passage alone:

Compassion	Kindness	Humility	Meekness
Patience	Tolerance	Forgiveness	Love
Peacefulness	Thankfulness	Devotion	Co-operation
Gratitude	Joy	Activity	Outreach

A life that is giving evidence of all these things is a life in which the Spirit of God is busy at work. A church that is giving evidence of all these things is a church in which the Spirit of God is busy at work. These are the signs, every bit as powerful, dramatic and life changing as tongues of fire and a mighty, rushing wind, signs which can transform our lives and our church with a dynamic force that nothing in all the world could stop.

People are looking for compassion, and a place they can grow and share their own compassion. People are looking for kindness, and a place they can practice kindness. People are looking for humility instead of vanity, meekness instead of aggression, patience, tolerance, forgiveness and love instead of the values they find assaulting them on their televisions and in their own streets. Who doesn't want to find somewhere for themselves and their families where peacefulness, thankfulness, devotion and cooperation are taught? Who wouldn't want to be among others expressing gratitude, joy, activity and outreach as central components of a fulfilled and worthwhile life?

Hear this: When the Holy Spirit gets a hold of us and our church, then these attributes, these gifts, these signs, will be what stops passers-by in their tracks; they will become that for which we are known; we will be a church filled with the Spirit of God. Get all these gifts in place, and then we'll talk about swinging from the chandeliers and rolling in the aisles – decently, of course, and in good order.

These are the signs. We're going to spend the next five weeks looking more closely at them, and at us. Watch for these signs. Work for these signs. Pray for these signs. And pray that God would make your life a living signpost, pointing to the presence of the Spirit of God, alive, at work, filling your life, filling our church, filling our souls with fire.

“Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church... And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Amen.