

Scriptures

Numbers 11:24-30

24 So Moses went out and told the people what the Lord had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. 25 Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again.

26 However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. 27 A young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”

28 Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, “Moses, my lord, stop them!”

29 But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” 30 Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Acts 2:1-21

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them.

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5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

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

Peter Addresses the Crowd

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

17 “In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

18 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

19 I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

20 The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

21 And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

Sermon:

Chaos. Chaos and cacophony. The very first time we hear of the Spirit of God is at the beginning of all things, when the universe was formless and empty. No structure, no physical laws, no order – just chaos. Darkness reigned over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God brooded over the waters.

At a word from God, the universe exploded into being – what kind of sound calls a universe into being? What kind of sound accompanies the creation of planets? The Spirit presided over a noise and a chaos that is unimaginable to us.

When the Spirit comes again, we sense the echoes of that chaos and cacophony from the ancient past. The Spirit brings order, but not in the way we would expect, not in the way that we would ask for.

We’re all familiar with the Exodus story – Moses leading the Israelites through the desert from slavery in Egypt to freedom in God’s Promised Land. Along the way the people began to moan and to murmur. There were 620 000 men – adding wives and children probably meant there were upwards of two million people.

They were complaining, crying out – wailing. ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’ They were becoming unruly, unmanageable. Two million defiant protestors – chaos and cacophony. Into this crisis came the Spirit of God; God took some of the Spirit that he had apportioned to Moses and gave it to seventy other leaders, gifting them to shepherd the seditious sheep.

The seventy were standing before the people with Moses, and as they were filled with the Spirit they began to prophesy; they spoke words from God to the people. This clearly demonstrated to the murmurers upon whom God’s authority rested.

But there was a problem – two men who weren’t up at the front with Moses began to prophesy as well – they were showing the evidence of the Spirit.

The Spirit came to calm the chaos and impose order, yet the Spirit was upon two unexpected people - Eldad and Medad. Moses shows great faith and leadership in this situation; while others call out against the two unexpected leaders, Moses celebrates the fact that they have been given gifts and authority, but many others are left confused, and perhaps a little put out, that the Spirit does not operate in the way they thought she should.

We see a very similar situation in Acts. In our previous story, the people were in revolt and Moses was overwhelmed. In this case, the Romans have just put down a potential rebellion and the disciples are overwhelmed. This is a crisis that threatens to break apart God’s people.

Enter the Spirit of God. The God who appeared to Moses as a burning bush appeared on the day of Pentecost as divided tongues of fire and a roaring wind. As in the previous story, the Spirit alights on unexpected people.

We usually think of the eleven disciples being in the upper room alone, but if we look at the previous chapter we are told that Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James joined together in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

The total group of believers numbered about one hundred and twenty men and women, and when the day of Pentecost came, they were *all* together, *all* of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them.

This means that Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were prophesying along with Jesus’ brothers, the disciples, and a whole host of unnamed saints. Peter, like Moses, does not make distinctions about who is ‘authorised’ and who is not; he celebrates the outpouring of the Spirit wherever he sees it.

Peter quotes the prophet Joel, saying:

In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

The Spirit of God does not favour those with position or power, nor does the Spirit favour men over women, old over young, nor one nation over another. We would impose order using hierarchy, the Spirit banishes chaos using an entirely different set of criteria than us.

After linking the two readings together, now it's time to link those ancient texts to us and our present world and culture.

On that first Pentecost day, the believers were not yet a church. Luke, the author of Acts, doesn't portray them as hiding, as some other accounts do, but neither are they active witnesses. They are sequestered, waiting together as Jesus instructed them.

They gather in the Temple, they gather in each other's homes, they pray, they watch, and they wait. There is a feeling of apprehension – Roman soldiers are of course still in charge of the city – Jesus has created unrest with the political elites, but also Jesus has created conflict with the religious rulers as well. The disciples are still able to worship in the temple, but they won't be able to for much longer. Soon they will be put out of the temple.

This means that not only will they be pursued by the military, they will no longer have sanctuary among their own people. They will be alone in the world. Their future of the fledgling church is not looking good.

The great commission that Jesus gave his disciples was to 'go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'

That is not what this church was doing. They were keeping to themselves, maintaining a low profile, worried about the future. They were insular, inward focussed, and anxious.

There was no bold proclamation accompanied by signs and wonders; they were worried about their very existence.

This sounds like many modern North American churches. There is a lot of anxiety in churches these days; the feeling that the culture is against us – we live in a society that is not only unchristian, but a society that actively espouses values that go against Christian values.

Our culture rewards the ruthless, the powerful, the aggressive; the boasters, the bold, the devious – essentially the opposite of what Jesus extolled in his sermon on the mount. We're in a hostile environment.

As culture changes, so too has the church. In many churches attendance has dropped, as have donations – doors close and churches get sold off – there is an Anglican church being auctioned in Brantford now with the starting bid of one dollar.

In this atmosphere of anxiety and fear, churches turn inward – focussed only on survival. Many North American churches are just like that very first church – insular, inward focussed, and anxious.

The problem with this is that if the church is not fulfilling its mission of being a witness, if we are not boldly out in our communities proclaiming the risen Christ with signs and wonders, then we cease to be the church.

In our time, just the same as two thousand years ago, the church without the Spirit of God is timid and ineffectual. Deep down we know that there is something deeply wrong with a lack of Spirit. Flesh without spirit is a monster: Frankenstein, zombies, werewolves, the boogeyman. *Animus absque spiritus.*

God's Spirit is a unifying force that brings together and empowers God's people to be witnesses to the world. In the Numbers reading the Spirit was given to bring God's word to his people to gather them together and to remind them of their calling to be a light and a blessing for all nations. At Pentecost, the Spirit was given to empower the believers and to birth Christ's Church that serves as his witness.

With this enabling at Pentecost – with the coming of the Spirit - the timid, self-absorbed church burst out onto the street with Peter in the lead, boldly proclaiming Christ's name in as many languages as there were people.

We read some of what Peter had to say, but in that chaos everyone was speaking, everyone was prophesying. In the words of Joel, the Spirit has been poured out upon all flesh, we are no longer limited by age, gender, race, nation or social status. The Spirit enables each of us to become transmitters of that same Spirit; life giving waters flow from us when we are filled with the Spirit.

The Spirit that swept through that house gifted more than those disciples at Pentecost. God's Spirit has been loosed into the world, and its creative and life-giving power is now a gift available to all people and all nations. It is available to us. Indeed, the Spirit is already among us.