

June 4, 2017
Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2:1-4; Galatians 4:1-7

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“It Filled the House: the Wind and Fire of Pentecost”

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were *all together in one place*. This is how Luke, the author of Acts, begins his description of that dramatic event of the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit, which the church has come to celebrate as Pentecost. They were all together in one place; this assertion cries out for attention. Luke does not say merely that they were together, or that all were present, but instead they were “all together” and “in one place.” Neither the number of people nor the place are specified, though it seems likely that more than the apostles were present. Here was an event that was disruptive, yet empowering, singular and discrete and yet all-encompassing, comprehensive, and universal in scope. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound – not something seen, but something heard – like the rush of a violent wind. A violent rushing wind, a wind that breaks up as it breaks in, a wind that cuts through stagnant air and loosens the bonds of slavery; a wind that carries and empowers, a wind that announces itself upon its arrival, a wind that razes all hierarchies by dividing tongues in its appearance among them, among all the people together in one place, and so too, among us.

The Spirit arrives as a wind that announces the presence and nearness of God to which those who were all together in one place could only respond in tongues of praise and adoration. Here is a God who is both deeply present, *Immanuel*, God with us, and yet mysteriously other, unpredictable, unmanageable, wild, and *dare I say it – charismatic*. The Spirit arrives *from* heaven and it *filled the entire house* where they were sitting; dissolving all structures, whether tangible or imagined, that would seek to enclose and contain the freedom of the living God. Where the Spirit is present there are no walls to protect and defend *us* from *them*, the elect from the damned, the worthy from the unworthy. Like the rush of a violent wind; and divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. *All* of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. The old stagnant air of the old age is now passing away, and the new air from heaven, the air that breathes new life into dry bones as the prophet Ezekiel once described it, the air that brings life out of nothing, new life that has the power to raise the dead, this now is coming to pass, right here, right now, in our midst. Notice how Luke does not say that this Spirit descends only to a select few; notice how Luke does not say that this Spirit is given and handed down by human hands; notice how Luke does not say that this Spirit is to be found in the structures maintained by any church constitution, order, or law. No: the Spirit filled them *all* and *all* began to speak in other languages – not by their own abilities or potentialities, not because of any merely human giftedness or talents that they may or may not have possessed or achieved by their own merit, not on account of any previous training, education, or formation. Instead, Luke insists that the Holy Spirit alone gave them the ability to speak in heavenly tongues; wind and fire—Pentecostal, charismatic wind and fire. And this Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that is intimately present among, within, beside us, closer to us than we are to ourselves, it is this Spirit that is at the same time unmanageable, uncontainable, unpredictable; always new, always enlivening, always present, always faithful, always upbuilding, always life-giving, always loving, always *always* given again and again *for you* and *for me* and for the whole earth that God so loves.

The Holy Spirit is the power that *razes* all hierarchy to the ground with wind and fire; in its presence we are all brought low, all made dependent on the Spirit; the Spirit does not move us to look upward as great medieval cathedrals would have us do, but it opens us up to *listen* and to *feel* that which moves *between* us and *among* us, sometimes even *beneath* us, breaking up as it breaks in, creating new life out of nothing. And it fills the room, even as it fills us; the old is gone and new has come! To borrow a phrase from a wonderful Bruce Cockburn song, “Open up the windows; let the bad air out! Open up the windows; let the bad air out!”

In the Hebrew Bible, wind and fire are regularly associated with appearances of the presence of God among the people. Hebrew Bible scholars call these appearances “theophanies.” One might think of, for example, God’s appearance to Moses in the form of a burning bush in Exodus 3 or the “pillar of fire” given to the people of Israel so that they might travel by day and by night. The presence of God encounters Elijah following a “great wind” that was so strong, according to the author of 1 Kings that it was “splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces” (1 Kgs 19:11-12). So the image of wind and fire set the scene of the Spirit in Acts; they are signs of God’s movement in the midst of the people.

For the apostle Paul, writing to the people of Galatia, this Spirit brings redemption and adoption. In Galatians 4:3 and later again in 4:9, Paul makes reference to “the elements of the cosmos” (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*). In both cases he speaks of two contrasting periods, distinguished from one another by a radical change in the relationship human beings have to these elements. The earlier period, the period of the old age is that prior to the advent of Christ and the sending of the Spirit; the second is the one since that event. For Paul, the “elements of the cosmos” had the power to enslave and they exercised that power over all human beings. For those in Paul’s time, the cosmos was thought to be composed of elements along a certain binary, pairs of opposites—the cosmos at its natural foundation consists of earth/air and fire/water; so, too, oppositional binaries were thought to be foundational to and for the social, religious, economic order, even sex and gender constitute oppositional pairs (Jew/Gentile, circumcision/uncircumcision, Law/Not-Law, slave/free, male/female). Prior to the advent of Christ and the sending of his Spirit we are all *minors*, Paul says, drawing on an analogy from Roman household laws, we were all enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. Paul’s concern in this letter is to address the doctrine of the so-called “Teachers,” that group of Jewish Christians whose teachings had gained ground in the community at Galatia instructing the community, especially Gentile Christians that in order to be “adopted” into the elect people of God, the people of Abraham and Moses, one had to first become a Jew, be circumcised, and follow the Law. Paul challenges this teaching by insisting that with the advent of the Son, Jesus Christ, and the sending of the Spirit, a *new age* had broken in, an age of freedom in which the old oppositional binaries no longer applied. It was not only Gentiles were once enslaved to the elemental spirits, but *all* were enslaved, *all* were possessed by these oppositional pairs. But now, Paul writes, “when the fullness of time had come, God sent God’s son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” In the crucifixion of Christ, dying as he did as one “cursed by the Law,” Paul writes earlier in chapter 3, this curse, through the power of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, has finally been robbed of its power. It is through the power of the cross and resurrection of Jesus that we are sent free, adopted as sons and daughters of the living God without distinction of rank or order and without regard for the binaries that held previously held sway.

The arrival of the Spirit breaks up as it breaks in; it is the event by which all hierarchical distinctions—constructed, maintained, and enforced through the violent imposition of social, economic, religious, racial, sexual or gender discrimination—are *razed* to the ground. In the presence of the Spirit those who have violently secured themselves a place above others are brought low, and those who have been rendered “impure” in the sight of others are lifted up and affirmed, adopted as children of the living God. The Spirit arrives by breaking in as it breaks up; those who had no place are now given a place; those who had no voice are now given to speak; those who were once possessed are set free. In this space of freedom *all* are filled with the Spirit, each in his or her own way, not to be incorporated into the old age of stagnant air and binary oppositions, but into the *new age* of freedom defined by mutual love, freedom that comes like the rush of a violent wind and with Pentecostal fire, to breath new life into dry bones, a freedom that opens up the windows and lets the bad air out. Gathered by the one Spirit in love, we as a congregation, and we as individuals, are empowered each in our own way, to witness to the coming of this new world of freedom, defined by the fruits of the Spirit that Paul describes later in Galatians, as characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, not so that we would return to the old age of stagnant air, of bitterness and resentment, of violent hierarchical distinctions, but so that the Spirit may fill us in our hearts so that may too cry “Abba! Father!” You are no longer a slave but a child an heir of the living God, released by rushing wind of the charismatic Spirit and Pentecostal fire.

“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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy (2:17-18). This word, from the prophet Joel, is fulfilled upon the arrival of the Spirit at Pentecost. It is not a Spirit that can be packaged and contained, nor is it a Spirit that breathes within the space of old, stagnant air. It is Spirit that is free and free charismatically. Come, Holy Spirit, and fill this house with new life; let the bad air out. Come, Holy Spirit, like a rushing violent wind, break up in and on your congregation, guide us charismatically in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.