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Title: Wind and Fire

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Scripture: [Exodus 19:16-19](#)

Text: [Acts 2:1-3](#)

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It could be my point of view. I'll admit it; as a preacher, I wear theological glasses. But it seems to me that nature has put on a show in advance of Pentecost. Maybe you didn't make the connection. It is hard for me to miss. The wind and fire, the explosions that sound like cannon shots, the sun turned to darkness from the clouds above the

fiery mountain. And person after person interviewed saying, "Things will never be the same again." It sounds like Pentecost to me, at least the first Pentecost.

The nature show that I'm talking about is Kilauea's volcano explosion, the wind and fiery lava, the 30,000 foot explosion of ash making a smoky mountain. Volcanic winds are blowing. Fissures are spewing fire like a kiln beneath the surface. The blasts of boulders spewed out of the volcano trumpet the power of creation.

Still haven't made the connection? Then listen to the description. "Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder." (Exodus 19:16-19) I'm confident that the witnesses at the base of that holy mountain said, "Things will never be the same."

That is the first Pentecost, fifty days after the first Passover. The first Passover took place in Egypt when the angel of death "passed-over" the homes of God's enslaved people. It secured their liberation from Pharaoh. As the story goes, Moses leads them into the wilderness for forty days. They stop, encamping at the foot of Mt. Sinai and Moses climbs the Holy Mountain. He is there for a number of days and at that end of that time, God tells him to gather the people at the foot of the mountain. Nothing short of a volcano takes place with a wind and fire show. During the nature show, Moses

receives the Ten Commandments and when he came down, the people were right. The Law was written not just on a table but on their hearts as well. And, "things were never the same."

This is the first Pentecost, even though it isn't the Pentecost we know as the birth of the church. Pentecost is Greek for the Hebrew word Shavuot. Shavuot is one of the great festival celebrated by the Jewish people and prescribed in Leviticus. It celebrated the harvest even as it remembers the moment when there was a wind and fire storm on Mt. Sinai, the moment God changed everything with the gift of the Law on stone tablets. Centuries later, God uses the ancient experience of wind and fire to transform again.

I don't know if they made the connection in advance as they waited. As Jesus was ascended into heaven, Jesus told them to wait. The calendar could have given them a hint. Jesus ascended after forty days. Forty days was the time it took to get to Mount Sinai. Did anyone connect the dots? Probably not.

All we know is Jesus said wait. Wait for "...the power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1: 8) He could have added, "and things will be never be the same again" but he didn't. They'd have to figure that out themselves.

So, they waited and waited, ten days from the time Jesus said to wait. Ten days brought them to the Festival of Pentecost. Did they think, "The power of God is coming on Pentecost?" Probably not. Scripture doesn't tell us. I don't think they had a clue that God was going to explode them like He had in a desert 1300 years earlier. They couldn't imagine an eruption of yellow and red fire which was on top of the Holy Mountain about to come rest upon them. They didn't have a clue that an earthquake was about to change the landscape and volcanic winds were about to blow down every wall around them, changing their lives forever. But the wind and fire display on Mt. Sinai was about to happen once again, this time on Mt. Zion, in Jerusalem. A miraculous display of divine power was going to break into the world.

This is the way it is described. "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." (Acts 2:2a) It doesn't say anything about "the blast of a trumpet growing louder and louder." It doesn't say it was an explosion of boulders sounding like cannon blasts. But the similarity is striking, a volcanic moment because the Spirit comes in like "the rush of a violent wind." There is a sound there that you can hear; movement that you can feel. But what does wind look like? We can't see wind; they couldn't either.

What did they see? Fire, sort of. "They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. (Acts 2:3) Fire is one of God's favorite tools for getting attention, God's "go-to" way of appearing. Fire in a bush that doesn't consume. Fire descending on Mt. Sinai. A pillar of fire leading Israel through the wilderness at night. The violent wind rushes through the room while tongues of fire sit still on the top of their heads. But was it really fire? It appeared, as if it was fire, seemed to be fire, but they weren't burned. What was it? They didn't know, even after they met him. And we don't know either. What the Spirit of God looks like isn't the point. It is what the Spirit of God does that is important.

It breaks down walls. The little group of disciples gathered in that upper room suddenly aren't in the upper room any longer. It's like the walls fall away and they find themselves in the middle of a big crowd. In an instance, the scene shifts from a room to outdoors. They are surrounded by an enormous group of people from every nation. From Asia to southern Europe and Africa, people who lived a long time ago and people who'd yet to live. This is an incredible list of people, some of who had been enemies, others who were friends, different tribes, gender, color, and language.

There wasn't a physical barrier between them. There wasn't a wall keeping them apart. They could understand each other because "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." (Acts 2:4) The Miracle of Pentecost is less in the hearing and much more in the speaking. Disciples speak in the mother tongues of others, not by their own design but by the Spirit's desire.¹ Here is the explosive, defining moment of who they will be and who we are to be, the ones who readily speak the language of God's love.

What an incredible surprise, an amazing, head scratching moment because they, like us were naturally wary, suspicious, even afraid. Put them in this crowd before the wind and fire of the Spirit shows up and they say, "I don't trust him. I don't like her looks. He scares me. Those people are dangerous. I'm afraid of what she believes." But when the Holy Spirit fills them, they have this incredible power to move beyond suspicions and fears and speak about God to people they didn't even know. "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." (Acts 2: 12-13)

And if to give testimony to the fact that after such experience, you are never the same, Peter: the disciple who spent most of his time hopping on one foot because the other was in his mouth, Peter: the rough, impulsive fisherman voted least likely to succeed in public speaking, Peter explains ***what this***

means. He put all fears and mistrust aside and preaches to people, some who he doesn't know, others who he didn't like, hadn't trusted, and had even perhaps been responsible for their terror and fear. Peter preaches about dreams and vision and signs, about the love of God in the gift of Jesus, about Jesus who was crucified by some of the very people present. But they are still loved. God's love in Christ is for everyone, no matter where they are from or what they look like or what language they speak.

Pentecost comes to share this explosive truth. "Speak a language, speak a people." God speaks people, fluently. And God, with all the urgency that is with the Holy Spirit, wants the disciples of his only begotten Son to speak people fluently too. This is the beginning of a revolution that the Spirit performs.² That's what this means. Right then and there, the church was launched. "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." (Acts 2:1)

Things were never the same afterwards because the Spirit required them to move beyond the walls they were hiding behind. They were required to overcome whatever fears or barriers that they believed existed and become the Body of Christ. They were required to speak a language of love across the barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, and politics, and challenge stereotypes and risk ridicule. It is a brave and disorienting act.

What does it mean for us? The same, it always has meant the same, and maybe it is an even more compelling truth for today. It is definitely a story for our time. We live in this world where words are toxic, where language divides us into this group or that. We build walls between people sitting right in our very midst, barriers and borders around race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, or politics. Why bother to understand each other or speak to those whom we disagree? Why not sneer instead? Sneering is easier and for some, it's just more fun.

Why bother? Because the Holy Spirit requires it, demands us, pushes us beyond our walls and doors. Remember, God speaks people, fluently and God wants the same of us. So God sends the Spirit to compel us to engage one another, to speak and listen to one another and love one another. That might surprise you. You might even think, "He's been drinking." But the answer is no. This is the explosive power of Pentecost, the wind and fire that is active even today.

Andrew Forsthoefel has finished writing his book. It is titled *Walking to Listen: 4,000 miles across America, one story at a time*. I've mentioned him before but let me remind you of his story. It's worth hearing again. In 2011, after he graduated from Middlebury College, he decided to walk across

the Continental United States from his home in Philadelphia all the way to the Pacific Coast. No rides. No smart phone. He carried a backpack containing camping equipment, a camera, a food bag stocked with jerky, tuna fish and PB&J, and a sign hanging off the pack that said, "Walking to listen."

He also carried a voice recorder that he used to collect the stories of those he met along the way, asking them the question, "If you could go back, what would you tell yourself at 23?" The question yielded some remarkable answers, which Andrew has written in his 2017 book.

Andrew admits that along with his spirit of adventure he traveled with an acute sense of vulnerability. At times he said he was "fear-walking." And this fear was heightened by those that he met along the way. Not one person said that they would tell their 23-year-old self to be more cautious or more fearful. To the contrary, their messages were full of boldness and daring. Nonetheless, Andrew described how when people took him in they were constantly warning him--telling him to watch out for the others down the road. "Don't trust them," they would say. "They're not like us."

"What I wish," Andrew said thinking back, "is that these people could have experienced what I did and seen that the people that they had warned me about were the very ones who took me in later on, and fed me, and told me *their* stories." Of course most people never had the chance to learn that, from behind their own doors.³

I don't know if it was the Spirit that caused him to go on that walk. But I do know it is the truth of Pentecost that he learned, a truth that we need today. The revolution began when God sent wind and fire to break down walls and fire up people to engage one other with love, to learn the language which God uses with everyone, people speak. God speaks people perfectly. With the help of the Spirit so can we.

It is the challenge of Pentecost and it always comes with a question. What would happen if you allowed the explosion to remove those walls and fire you up to speak? And who is it that God would send you to? Who is it that you need to listen to, see, accept, even if you aren't sure you like what you see, agree with what you hear, or even want to accept? The list is long isn't it? In times like this, it always is. What will it be? Faith or fear? Pentecost calls us to decide how we will walk, act and live our lives as we respond to the explosive power of the Holy Spirit.

The invitation is there. Let all those walls fall away. Allow the Holy Spirit to fill you with wind and fire. If you do, I'm confident you'll say, "Things will never be the same again."

¹ Jennings, Willie James. Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Belief: a Theological Commentary on the Bible) (p. 27). Presbyterian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

² Jennings, Willie James. Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Belief: a Theological Commentary on the Bible) (p. 30). Presbyterian Publishing. Kindle Edition.

³ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/2017/03/07/college-graduate-hikes-across-america-seeking-advice-how-live-rest-his-life/OLqAZxeQlrV2IGTkYtkmoJ/story.html>