

AND SUDDENLY . . .

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Text: Acts 2:1–21

The writer of Luke-Acts reports that those who were all together in one place on the day of Pentecost numbered about 120 people. By the end of this chapter in the book of Acts, the writer tells us that about 3,000 people were added to the Jesus movement, painting a vivid picture of just how dramatic and compelling the whole experience of the arrival of the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God, was. When the Holy Spirit is unleashed, things won't be and can't be the same. That unexpected, unpredictable movement of God, expressed with a jarring interruption in the narrative flow with the words "and suddenly," introduces these followers and us, the readers, to God's startling capacity to transform the world. This pouring out of God's spirit on this rag-tag bunch, who had just recently bid farewell to their leader Jesus and now devoted themselves to prayer, ministry, and apostleship, is the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made that they would have power when the Spirit of God came upon them and that they would do more incredible things than Jesus did.

And it happened, all of a sudden. And suddenly, God poured out God's spirit upon them and changed everything. God poured out God's spirit and gave them the ability to do the things they thought they couldn't do, say the things they were once too afraid to say, and go to the places they would not dare go. Empowered by the Spirit of God, these followers of Jesus ran outside of the walls of their safety and comfort into the public square and began to speak. That's right. They broke into the world through speech, God-ordained, and God-inspired speech. They do not speak the language of empire, commerce, or control. In every language spoken, they talked about what God had done and was doing. And anybody willing to hear it could and would understand it. They were no longer hearers; they were now doers. No longer just receivers of the gospel, they were now witnesses and prophets. And it is contrary to anything expected or practiced in the world.

And suddenly . . . they were no longer fearful, or powerless, or cowardly, or devoid of a strategy. They were empowered to move out from a place of futility and wilderness. And suddenly . . . they were no longer divided by language or ethnicity or geography or history. The gift of the Spirit of God that Jesus had prayed for and talked about . . . to be clothed in power from on high, to discern the truth and be witnesses to all that God has done, to be furnished with words and wisdom that the opponents of God will not be able to withstand or contradict, activated a prophetic, salvific new witness in the world. And suddenly . . . this gift of the Spirit of God birthed into the world a new institution: the church, which, like Rome but now God's rival alternative to Rome, was a multiethnic, multilingual, interregional power.

There is something about the Spirit of God that emboldens people dismissed as weak, backwater nobodies of low estate to step forward with something to say. It wasn't safe to assert themselves in this way because the same empire that crucified and killed Jesus was just as capable and willing to do the same to them. But there is something about the Spirit of God that helps people to resist business as usual. There is something about receiving God's Spirit that pushes everyone who is touched by it to go out to speak about God and bear witness to God's liberating work. Not just the eleven, but men and women, young and old,

prophesying what thus says the Lord about this new manifestation of God. Even the enslaved, the least of these by the standards of culture, will be moved by the Spirit to act outside the strictures of status to dream, envision, and prophesy.

Someone in the crowd, articulating the apparent impossibility and incredulity about how these Jesus people were behaving, joked that they must be drunk. Someone else in the crowd asked, “What does this mean?” They asked because what they were witnessing did not look like business as usual. They were seeing a passing away of the way things used to be. They were seeing a refusal to accept the status quo, a refusal to defer to Rome’s way of doing things, a refusal to bow down in fear of the powers that be. They were seeing a people becoming a community of every race, gender, ethnicity, and language that would no longer reinforce and reinscribe normative practices of empire. They were seeing the vision of God’s beloved community living out boldly, loudly, and fearlessly and inviting others to join in a new life of love and liberation. It happened suddenly. That’s how the Spirit of God acts.

So, that harvest festival of Pentecost becomes for these followers of Jesus and for the church an inflection, a moment of assertion, empowerment, boldness against the status quo, moving away from the place of fear, caution, and mourning to embracing the God-given ability to dream, to envision, and to prophesy about what the reign of God is. If you’ve ever wondered what was so important about Pentecost, if you’ve had trouble discerning the place of the Holy Spirit, it is ultimately God’s assurance that in our promptings for love and justice, in our speaking truth to power about liberation from the bondage to the systems and structures of empire, God is with us and activates God liberating presence and activity in our midst.

For a long time, I thought that God’s “and suddenly” movement didn’t happen anymore. Because we’ve been shaped by an individualistic, transactional, stratified culture and economy, one of the errors we make when thinking about the Spirit of God is that it is a private experience of faith or that it is only conferred upon people of a particular type of faith or that its manifestation is most visible in personal piety. But we must be careful about that, for God seeks to be known, heard, and understood whenever, wherever, and to whomever we speak. God’s “and suddenly” intervention, that movement of God’s Spirit, that pouring out the God’s Spirit on all flesh, is the precipitation for action—movement, truth-telling, doing something.

God’s “and suddenly” moments will break through like the rush of a violent wind, and it is frightening and noisy and the catalyst for change. And all who are filled with it will be compelled to movement, truth-telling, doing something. That’s what it looked like when Rosa Parks, Rev. Martin Luther King, and the Black Church moved out of the safe confines of the church walls into the street to become a noisy, frightening catalyst for change for a nation mired in racism, segregation, and discrimination. I know people have all kinds of political and sociological explanations for what happened. Of course, Black people have been agitating for Black freedom from enslavement through Jim Crow discrimination, segregation, and disenfranchisement. But something happened when church folk began to dream, prophesy, and envision what the world should look like for all God’s children.

So, I don’t think it was by chance that when Parks and King and the Black Church, empowered by the Spirit of God, ran out into the public square, marched into the streets, placed their bodies and lives on the line for the sake of liberation, that the whole world took notice and the structures of Jim Crow began to fall. Oh, some heard this noisy disruption and became disoriented by what looked like an “and suddenly” interruption of the status quo and, in bewilderment, wanted to know, “What does this mean? Who are these people, and who do they think they are? Something must be wrong with them to take these risks.”

I believe that a fresh wind of the Spirit of God is blowing again. There’s a new wind of God blowing on Plymouth, rattling our doors. We are tempted to batten down the hatches and hide away inside. We may be tempted to bet on what is familiar. But God is actively involved in transforming the world and pours out God’s Spirit on us so we can participate in the new thing God is doing. I pray we assume the posture of prayer, ministry, and discipleship in preparation to embrace the gift of God’s Spirit. I pray that we run

out into the public square and speak up and speak out. We will disagree about what we should do. We will appeal to history, tradition, freedom of speech, and artistic expression. But I hope we also remember that we are receivers of the gift of God's spirit, that we allow God's "and suddenly" freedom to intervene and empower us to imagine a new, generative, and liberating way of being community. I pray we make room for the new thing God is up to, allowing the fresh wind to push us out beyond the walls, giving us the ability to speak such that people will hear us when we bear witness to God's liberating power.