



DEFINING MOMENT

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According to Dr. Phil, by the time each of us is an adult, we will have about ten defining moments in our lives. I don't know how he arrived at that number, but he's talking about those moments that come along and reshape who we are. It could be a decision or a crisis or an intense situation, but somehow we come out different on the other side than we were going in.

I had a defining moment in first grade. I had a record of the sound track from the movie *Born Free*, which I took to Mrs. Hansen's class. We played it on the little phonograph player they had in the room. I knew all the words. "Born free, as free as the wind blows..." I'm singing my heart out, thinking about those little lions, when I look over and Kim Baker is LAUGHING at me. In one horrible moment, I learned it was not cool to sing in front of your friends. I never did that again. Even though side two had some really cool songs.

I remember visiting Karin's grandpa one time after dementia had set in. He didn't know where he was or who we were. But an event from back in the 1920s was still fresh in his mind. He retold it to us as if he was right there. He was standing on a street in Los Angeles, trying to talk to somebody about Jesus, when they physically shoved him and yelled at him. He remembered all the words of the confrontation as if it had just happened, and he would act it out as he retold it. It had been a defining moment for his faith that changed him and stuck with him forever.

We all have those different points throughout our lives that have made us who we are. As we look back, we can see how we were changed in an instant. As we return to the book of Acts this morning, Luke is about to describe for us what I would call the defining moment of all time for the church.

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 them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs -- 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."

The arrival of the Holy Spirit is the beginning of the church. That day changed everything. It is the defining event that transformed a bunch of scared disciples into an explosive movement of people. You and I would not be sitting here today if it wasn't for the Holy Spirit. You can't overstate the importance of what happened that day.

If you take a scan of history, you can find countless wannabe messiahs. Right in the book of Acts, they talk about Theudus and Judas the Galilean, who both had followers and started new movements. They were killed, and their followers disbanded. In the middle ages, a man from Spain named Abraham Ben Samuel Abulafia declared the year 1290 to be the start of a new era where he would be messiah. He died a couple years later and his movement died, too. The Dutch had John of Leiden who declared himself to be the Christ. He told women they had to marry whatever man chose them, and he himself picked 16 brides. When he died, so did his influence.

There have been women, too, such as Jemima Wilkenson in the 1700s, who told people she was Jesus reincarnated. She told her followers she could even walk on water. When she asked how many believed her and they all raised their hands, she decided there wasn't any need to prove it then, so she walked home on land. She's now long gone and so are any Jemima-ites.

You could follow that list right up to our own times, with people like David Koresh. His death at the hands of the government could easily be turned into a martyrdom. But even within a few years, you don't hear of any Koresh followers still trying to hold true to his teachings. Strike the shepherd and the sheep scatter. When the messiah figure isn't on the scene anymore, you can't keep the group together.

What sets Christianity apart is that Christ is still on the scene. We aren't trying to remember a dead hero. We're not even trying to remember one who came back to life and then left. He is present in the form of the Holy Spirit, and that changes everything. Christ said this to his disciples:

Matthew 28:20

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

That wasn't just a nice thought – he was committing himself to be with believers for all time, and he did that by sending his Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who makes belief in Jesus something that is dynamic, personal and alive.

John Stott writes,

Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without his power.

Pentecost is THE defining moment for the church. Before Jesus had gone back up into heaven, he had promised his disciples that God would send them a gift. So they had been waiting in Jerusalem for about ten days. They must have wondered what exactly they were waiting for. How would they recognize it? How long would they have to wait? I'm sure they would never have predicted the way things unfolded. The Holy Spirit made a spectacular entrance that even people who weren't disciples couldn't ignore. Wind. Fire. Strange voices.

Scenes like this one make some people uneasy with the concept of the Holy Spirit. You might be thinking, "I'm more comfortable with Jesus. He walked around like a normal person. But this seems a little out there."

Luke tells us this happened on the first day of Pentecost and if you asked most people on the street about that word, they would probably think of Pentecostal churches. And if you asked them what they thought of Pentecostal churches, they would probably say they were a little wild and crazy, getting all emotional, talking about being filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and all that strange stuff. And it all finds its roots right here in Acts chapter 2. Some people are drawn to more dramatic spiritual experiences, but most of us get a little nervous. We get skittish when it comes to talking about the Holy Spirit because we don't want to be fanatical and do something we feel is overboard.

But if there's anything that you take away from this chapter, it should be that the Holy Spirit is for all Christians. Say that with me: "The Holy Spirit is for ALL Christians." He's not reserved for some radical fringe or extra religious people. What did that verse say?

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.

This experience was for every single one of the disciples at that time, and the Holy Spirit's presence today is for each and every Christian.

So we need to make sense of passages like this, even though they might intimidate us. What we find is that what seems crazy and strange in this chapter actually had real purpose behind it. The way this day unfolded served God's agenda and when we dig into

it a little more, it can help us better appreciate the incredible role of the Holy Spirit in our lives today.

Did you see in the news this week where a postal worker in Albany, New York caught a baby that fell out of a window? She was on the front porch of this house, delivering a letter when she looked up and saw a one year old fall out of the second story window right above the door. Her maternal instinct kicked in immediately and she caught the baby girl as she fell, saving her life.

It sounds like a happy coincidence that she happened to be on the porch at that moment, but it gets even better. The postal worker normally delivered mail to that house around 2:00 in the afternoon, but that particular day she had a special delivery that had to be signed for before noon, so she was there three hours ahead of her normal time. That sounds more like God than a coincidence.

God's timing can be absolutely breathtaking, and his sending the Holy Spirit was timed with pinpoint precision to happen on Pentecost. It was no accident.

Pentecost was and still is what Jewish people call the Festival of Weeks. The word means 50, because it is 50 days after Passover.

Leviticus 23:15-17

From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. 16 Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD.

The purpose of the festival was to honor God with the first fruits of the grain harvest, the first sheaf that signified the start of the harvest.

That was the official meaning of the celebration. But Pentecost also took on a secondary meaning. Israel believed it was 50 days from the Exodus until Moses went up on Mt. Sinai and received the ten commandments from God. So Pentecost became the celebration of the giving of the Law.

So there are these two strands of symbolism to Pentecost – the start of the harvest and the time God gave his people his very heart in the form of the Law. And on Mt. Sinai, that came in the midst of wind, fire and voices.

Exodus 19:18-19

Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

God then chooses that day to pour out his Spirit. It's as if he's saying, "This is the start of a new kind of harvest." And he pours out his Spirit in the way he gave the law, only this time he's writing his law on people's hearts. God had told Jeremiah,

Jeremiah 31:33

*I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.*

There's another way, though, in which the choosing of this day to give the Holy Spirit shows God's timing was impeccable. The festival itself brought thousands of people from all over the known world to Jerusalem. It was a pilgrimage event.

If you think back to the very beginning of Acts, just before Jesus returned to heaven, he left his disciples with one final sentence:

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Once they received the Holy Spirit, the disciples' primary mission was to carry the news about Jesus to the whole earth. So what does God do? He times the arrival of the Holy Spirit to coincide with a time when the whole world had come to Jerusalem. The result was fantastic. After Peter stood up and explained to the crowd what was going on, he gave an invitation for them to put their faith in Christ. And Luke says,

Acts 2:41

...about three thousand were added to their number that day.

It would have taken the little band of original disciples a very long time to make their way out into all the world. But now there are some 3,000 "missionaries" who in another week or so will go back to their homes in the countries Luke listed. The gospel gets a huge headstart, all because God chose the right moment to act.

So what seems like this burst of uncontrolled energy was actually very tightly controlled by God. He arranged it down to the last detail for maximum impact. Paul talks about Christ dying at just the right time, and in a similar way, God sent the Spirit at just the right time. What was that line Gandalf said about himself in the Lord of the Rings? "A wizard is never late, nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he intends to." That's God – amazingly precise in his timing.

What about all the craziness, though? What do we do with the phenomena around Pentecost? That's what seems to give us trouble. Are we supposed to experience the same things today that those first disciples did when they encountered the Holy Spirit? Some churches say "Absolutely," and some say "No way." Who's right?

Those are big questions that not only shape how we think about the Holy Spirit, but also how we think about the Bible. Christians try to do what the Bible says, so we need to know if it's saying anything here that we need to do.

Briefly, I want to respond to that with a couple observations. First, in the book of Acts, Luke is recording history for us. He's telling us how things happened, and not necessarily how things SHOULD happen in the future. I had a professor once who said we need to see the difference between what is DESCRIPTIVE and what is PRESCRIPTIVE. What is just part of the record and what is an example to be followed? If Luke had wanted us to copy what we see, he would have said so.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit's entrance at Pentecost was a one-time event that changed the Christian experience from that time forward. We no longer sit and wait to receive the Holy Spirit at some separate point from believing in Christ. For the past two weeks in a row, our guest speakers read that verse from Revelation, where Christ says, "I stand at the door and knock. If any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in." We receive Christ's Spirit as soon as we open our lives to him. There's not some special, separate arrival for us the way there was for those first disciples.

Let's say I have this cup, and I want a drink of water. First, I turn on the water and let it get cold for a minute. All I need to do at that point is put my glass under the water and it will be filled up. The water is already flowing – I don't need to wait for anything.

The same is true with the Holy Spirit. The faucet is already turned on. And just like I have water as soon as I place my glass under the stream, I have the Holy Spirit as soon as I open my life to Christ.

So that itself is different for us from the first disciples. We aren't out to recreate their experience. I think we also need to look at the what happened that day and see it in its bigger context. What marked the Holy Spirit's arrival? Wind, fire and voices. Those aren't three random signs – They have great meaning.

When Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to meet with the Lord? What accompanied it? Wind, fire and a voice. When Elijah saw the Lord, what accompanied it? Wind fire and a voice. The Israelites were led by a pillar of fire. God told Ezekiel he was sending a violent wind. God spoke from a burning bush. Isaiah's lips were touched with burning coals. Daniel's vision was of one with eyes like fire and a voice like the sound of a multitude.

Wind. Fire. Voices. Those are marks of God's presence and power throughout the Bible. They are statements to the world that what is happening in this place is of the Lord. Again – God chose specific markers because they are the signs of his activity so that there would be no doubt that the Holy Spirit had arrived straight from heaven.

So what happened at Pentecost is not something we are called to repeat, any more than we are to repeat Jesus' birth or death. It was a once and for all occasion.

Having said that, I want to look more closely with you at these three phenomena: Wind. Fire. Voices. Because although we're not looking for a direct copy of the disciples' experience, there is something about those three words that capture the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. They give us powerful imagery to describe what happens when he grabs a hold of individuals and communities.

Wind

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

When we were on this last mission trip to Mississippi, Irene, the director of the D'Iberville Volunteer Foundation, talked to the group about what it was like to be in D'Iberville the night Katrina hit. She said the most haunting thing about that night was the shriek and moan of the wind blowing at 145 miles an hour. She said, "I wish you could hear it, but on the other hand I wouldn't wish that on anybody, because it was horrific."

Imagine being the disciples and suddenly hearing a sound like that, like those hurricane force winds, right in the house where you're sitting. Shrieking and moaning all around you. They couldn't see anything, but they could hear it. That's how it is with wind – you recognize it by its effects, not by seeing it directly. Maybe you hear it howling, maybe you see leaves blowing or trees bending.

Wind is movement. It clears a path for itself. How do we know the Holy Spirit is active in our lives? He clears a path for himself. He sets about blowing against the sin in our lives, moving it to make room.

Back to the faucet and cup analogy. If my cup has a bunch of dirt in it, it's not going to be able to hold much water. But if I keep holding it under the faucet, eventually that water is going to make room for itself, forcing more and more of the dirt out of the cup.

One of the Holy Spirit's main jobs is the uncomfortable one of pointing out our sin. Jesus said,

John 16:8-9

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.

I like how he includes righteousness and judgment along with sin, because sometimes the Spirit's moving goes beyond the obvious sins. Ten years after World War II, there were some peacemakers who were trying to bring reconciliation. They went to a group of Polish Christians to ask them to meet with some West German Christians who wanted to ask for forgiveness for what Germany had done during the war. One of the Poles said,

“What you’re asking is impossible. Every stone in Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood. We cannot forgive.”

Still, the group chose to pray the Lord’s prayer at the end of their meeting, and when they got to the line, “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us,” everyone stopped. It got completely silent. Then the man who had been so angry before said to the peacemakers, “I have to say yes to you. I couldn’t call myself a Christian anymore if I refuse to forgive. I wouldn’t be able to pray this prayer. I must say yes.”

That’s the movement of the Holy Spirit, movement that is often further than we’d like to go. That’s the wind that not only pushes us to stop sinning but that pushes us to forgive when we’ve been sinned against.

N.T. Wright talks about the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost and how we prefer to analyze it like we would get a weather report. But then he says,

It’s important that someone somewhere is tracking the hurricane and telling us what it’s doing, but when it comes to Pentecost it’s far more important that you’re out there in the wind, letting it sweep through your life, your heart, your imagination, your powers of speech, and transform you from a listless or lifeless believer into someone whose heart is on fire with the love of God.

Are you ready to be moved, to have the dusty corners of your heart swept clean? That’s what the Holy Spirit comes in to do, and we need him to move through us like wind on a daily basis, scattering the debris we accumulate.

Fire

In addition to the image of wind, Luke describes what appeared to be flames. Picture a ball of fire coming down from heaven, then splitting into smaller flames that moved out over each person’s head. Talk about a scary prospect. I’ve come close to setting my hair on fire a couple times, and I about panicked.

Fire has many characteristics, but one of its most distinguishing features is its **appetite**. It is insatiable. It wants to consume everything around it.

Have you ever known somebody you would describe as being on fire for God? What does that mean? Generally speaking, it means they have an insatiable appetite for the things of God. They want to know him better. They’re passionate about him. They hunger for him and constantly wanting more of him. That’s the kind of fire the Spirit brings to our hearts – an appetite for God.

A physical fire’s appetite can either be fed or starved. You can keep adding logs if you want a fire to burn longer, or you can cut off the oxygen supply and remove any combustibles if you want to put it out.

The same is true for our spiritual fire – we can feed it and help fan the flame, or we can starve it. Paul warned his readers in Thessalonica to not put out the Spirit’s fire. That passion, that desire for God that comes from his Spirit needs to be cultivated and fueled. Sometimes we look at other people and think they must have just been born more spiritual than us, and that’s just not true. Gayle MacDonald writes,

It takes time to come to the fire, it takes effort to keep the fire burning. It takes a willingness to become quiet enough to hear what God might be saying, and it takes courage to snuff out competing sounds and demands that attempt to shorten or neutralize the effect of the fire time.

A second distinguishing quality of fire is **power**. It was a great day when the first humans discovered fire and learned to harness its power. Fire provides heat. Fire drives engines. Fire lights up the darkness.

As fire, the Holy Spirit empowered those first disciples to do things they never thought possible. Peter the fisherman had the courage and words to stand up and speak to a crowd of thousands. Stephen fearlessly faced death. Prison doors were opened. Sick people were healed. Demons were cast out. And the gospel was preached everywhere.

In other words, everything Jesus did when he was on earth continued through the apostles because the fire of the Holy Spirit gave them the very power of Christ himself. Does it seem like God is asking you to do something bigger than you can handle right now? Does it seem unfair? Maybe it’s because he wants you to learn the truth that it is now the same Spirit in you and me.

Romans 8:11

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

That’s an awesome thought. The demons you’ve been fighting can be beaten when you have the Spirit of the risen Christ burning in your life. The sickness you carry in your soul and body will ultimately be overcome when the Holy Spirit brings his power. The darkness that creeps into your mind can be banished as the Spirit blazes light. The chains that have been holding you down will break as he puts the flame of his blowtorch to them.

When we think of that kind of power, we say “I want some of that. If I had that power, there’s no telling what I could do.” But it’s not the kind of power we control. It’s the kind of power we give control to. The Holy Spirit has his way in us as we submit to him and let him do his work.

Paul encouraged Timothy to fan into flame the gift he’d received. What are you doing to fan the flames and fuel the fire of the Spirit in your own life?

Wind and fire are nice, but they're not any more spectacular than what happened next:

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Voice

Mention the Holy Spirit and some people immediately think about speaking in tongues. It's one of the most unusual and most controversial ways in which the Holy Spirit shows himself in Scripture. I've been in churches where teachers weren't allowed to even talk about speaking in tongues and I've been in churches where you were considered less spiritual if you didn't speak in tongues. There's a whole range of opinions out there.

That's not what this text is really about, so if you were hoping for a definitive answer, you'll have to come back when we're talking about 1 Corinthians. In a nutshell, though, Scripture doesn't support either the idea of banning speaking in tongues or demanding it as a sign of spirituality. It's just one of a whole list of ways the Spirit works, and the Bible is clear that it's not the most important way, so not to obsess over it.

Back to our passage. What's happening here is not speaking in some unknown language. It's speaking in ordinary human languages you haven't been taught. The disciples were from little fishing towns in Galilee. They had never studied Arabic or Pharsi or Italian. Yet here they were – speaking fluently in multiple languages, completely understood by their listeners.

Pretty fantastic. We aren't told in Acts whether or not they retained that ability. We can be mesmerized by the fact that it happened. But the Holy Spirit wasn't aiming for something to amaze and astound. He is eminently practical, and this ultimately wasn't a trick to impress the disciples. He wanted to communicate with all those people from so many places who had converged on Jerusalem that day. This was the best way to grab their hearts.

The value of the voice is for understanding and communication. That's what the Spirit was aiming for – getting the gospel out clearly in a way that glorified God. And that's exactly what people heard.

Jesus had told his disciples,

John 16:13

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.

That's one of the main roles of the Holy Spirit – to guide us into truth. Janet Massey talked about that at our last baptism. She said she used to read the Bible and it made no sense to her. That was before she had opened her heart to Christ. When she did that, she suddenly found it started to make sense. That's exactly how the Spirit works, opening ways of understanding and communication.

He does that in reverse as well, using his voice to communicate to God on our behalf.

Romans 8:26-27

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Isn't that good? We have a voice to God, a voice that understands our needs better than we do ourselves. We're not alone trying to come up with the right words to talk to God. The Spirit translates for us, saying what we most want to say.

On one level what happened on that Pentecost will never happen again. The Holy Spirit won't make another dramatic entrance like that one. But on another level, we all need a personal Pentecost. Just like those flames spread out to each individual, we need our own individual encounter with the Holy Spirit. He's not reserved for a few – he's for everybody.

I want to invite you to put your cup under the faucet this morning. Are you thirsty? Are you thirsty for him? What it takes is saying, "Lord Jesus, please come into my life. I need you. I believe you died for me on the cross. Forgive me and fill me up with your Spirit to live for you." And just like he said, he'll come in with wind, fire and his voice to transform your life.

Some of you know there's dirt in your cup. Ask him to fill you up and wash it out. Some of you feel like you're running on empty. Just knowing you're going to heaven isn't enough. You need a filling up for today. You need to refuel the fire. Ask him to do that for you today. Let this morning be a defining moment in your walk with him.