

## Spirit of Comfort and Power Acts 2:1-21

When we ask God to pour out God's Holy Spirit upon us, we are playing with fire. We don't know what we're asking for. In old Western movies, sometimes the plot revolved around stealing a wagon load of nitroglycerin. Of course, the good guys and the bad guys would also have a gunfight right by the wagon. Or someone would toss a little vial of nitro, and you'd hold your breath to see if it was safely caught. When we ask God to pour out the Holy Spirit on us, it's like watching a little toddler play with a little bottle of that same nitroglycerin. Such overwhelming power, such danger, and the child has no idea what she has in her hands.

I actually did some YouTube research, and found a video where a science teacher is doing a demo. He puts on his protective gear, and gently takes a small vial of nitroglycerin out of its protective encasing; then he uses a pipette to put just one drop of nitroglycerin on a piece of filter paper, and then hits it with a hammer. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjmH8pU5K9o>) Bam! When we ask for the Holy Spirit to come upon us, we are not playing it safe. We are playing with fire, power far beyond our ability to manage and control. Already this morning, we have asked for that explosive power.

The prayer of preparation: "Empower us with your Holy Spirit, that we may prophesy truth to power. Cause wonders to occur...that your justice may spring forth with tremors of righteousness and love." Or the prayer of confession: "Discomfort us in our complacency. Stir up a yearning...for justice and love...Cleanse us and make us new." I hear these words much differently than I did just a few days ago, after another mass murder at a school in Texas. "Discomfort us in our complacency." Later, in our offering prayer, we will pray together: "Your spirit is mighty enough to move mountains, strong enough to transform lives, and powerful enough to birth your new creation."

Make no mistake! We are playing with fire. We're not keeping things safe when we ask for the Spirit to move, when we ask the Spirit to transform us, or to speak through us. The quiet prayer meeting was interrupted: "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.” It’s like a tornado. If you thought our scripture reading today was confusing, what was it like on that first Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection? When we ask the Spirit to move, we are asking for a new Big Bang. We are asking for the eruption of Mt. Kilauea. We are not playing it safe.

The Spirit of God does not see national boundaries, clear even from our own Scripture reading today. “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” The Spirit of God does not see Democrats and Republicans. The Spirit of God does not see Progressives and Liberals and Conservatives. The Spirit of God does not see Protestants and Catholics, black evangelicals and white evangelicals, anti-abortion and pro-choice. The Spirit of God does not see “good guys” and “bad guys,” which we think we can so easily sift out, even though we’ve failed over and over and over. The Spirit of God sees people, not good guys and bad guys, not animals, but people who are all, each and every one, sinners. The Spirit of God sees people who are all, each and every one, in desperate need of God’s grace and saving power.

When we ask for the Spirit of God to be poured out on us in power, we are asking to see with the eyes of the Spirit. We are playing with fire. It will kick us right out of our easy day to day life. It might make us do something that surprises us even at the moment we do it. The Houston police chief, Art Acevedo, says that he has hit rock bottom regarding our fights over guns in this country. He says, “This isn’t a time for prayers, and study and Inaction, it’s a time for prayers, action and the asking of God’s forgiveness for our inaction.” (<https://www.facebook.com/ChiefArtAcevedo/posts/1676298439150998>)

The Spirit will kick us out of our complacency. We are playing with a power far beyond our ability to manage and control. It might make us do something that surprises us even as we do it. That’s what happened to Hector Black. Hector Black’s daughter, Patricia, was murdered by Ivan Simpson. In an interview, Hector talked about his

testimony during the sentencing hearing. He had written out his statement, knowing that he might otherwise not be able to find the words:

“I was saying how much we loved Patricia, how much she meant to us, and how wounded we were by what had happened. And I said, ‘I don’t know if I’ve forgiven you, Ivan Simpson, but I don’t hate you. I hate with all my soul what you did to my daughter. And then somebody turned me around to face him to say the last thing I had written. And I was looking at him, in his eyes, and said, ‘I wished for all of us who had been so wounded by this crime, I wish that we might find God’s peace. And I wish that also for you, Ivan Simpson.’ And then tears were streaming down his cheeks. It was the first time I looked into his eyes, and it was like a soul in hell. ...” (<http://www.mbird.com/2013/08/hector-black-forgives-the-man-who-murdered-his-daughter/>)

Having seen into Ivan Simpson’s eyes, seen a soul in hell, he couldn’t sleep that night, and he wrote a letter to Patricia’s murderer. Dear Ivan...About four weeks later, he got a letter back. Dear Hector...I listened to Hector’s story on Radiolab. Even years later, he was surprised at what he had done. He had corresponded with Ivan Simpson for ten years by the time of the interview. They had developed a friendship. Hector sent Christmas packages. And throughout the interview, you could hear his own surprise at the forgiveness and the friendship that developed. (Listen (about 20 minutes) at <https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/317629-dear-hector/>) Asking for the Holy Spirit’s power is a dangerous thing. It can turn our world upside down.

The story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is very dramatic. Just our little experience today was confusing and could be overwhelming. We had the different languages, but only four of them, and not the great rush of wind. I saw no fire atop anyone’s head.

Most of the time, the Spirit works more quietly, just as in the case of Hector Black and Ivan Simpson, or of the police chief of Houston. For example, we have in the book of 1 Kings, the story of Elijah’s encounter with God. “[God] said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the

Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’” (1 Kings 19:11-13)

Most of the time we have trouble hearing that voice that speaks out of the sound of sheer silence. Earlier this week I heard an interview with Mary Karr and she read a poem about the voice of God.

Wisdom: The Voice of God (Mary Karr)

*Ninety percent of what's wrong with you  
could be cured with a hot bath,  
says God through the manhole covers,  
but you want magic, to win  
the lottery you never bought a ticket for.  
(Tenderly, the monks chant,  
embrace the suffering.) The voice never  
panders, offers no five-year plan,  
no long-term solution, no edicts from a cloudy  
white beard hooked over ears.  
It is small and fond and local. Don't look for  
your initials in the geese honking  
overhead or to see through the glass even  
darkly. It says the most obvious [things], (expletive deleted)  
i.e. Put down that gun, you need a sandwich.*

But God is still doing the work of transformation, sometimes in very dramatic and surprising ways, and more frequently very quietly. We want magic. We want signs from heaven. We have asked for the great and overwhelming power of God to come upon us. How God responds is not in our power to control. But God will respond. The Spirit of God is, right now, doing the work of transformation in us who have asked for it.

