

The Rush of a Mighty Wind¹

Poet, T. S. Elliot once penned the words, "In my beginning is my end." This is so often true. How things get started holds the key to their essence throughout their existence. This truth explains part of the power of our text today about the coming of the Holy Spirit to the earliest church. There's much to learn about the church—our church—by paying attention to this beginning.

This incident, by the way, is definitely a momentous beginning. The story bristles with clues that God is launching a whole new phase in his work in the world. Readers familiar with the Old Testament will notice the unmistakable reminiscence of Mount Sinai in the details when the Hebrew people received the Ten Commandments at Sinai, there was wind and fire. Well, here too at Pentecost is wind and fire. So we're sort of back at the mountain. Even more obvious is the fact that this coming of the Spirit to the 120 in the upper room comes on the Jewish holiday, Pentecost, the day that celebrates the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. So Mt. Sinai and the giving of the Law, a pivotal moment in Israel's history has a presence in our minds as we read this story.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on May 31, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church of LaGrange, GA.

Accordingly, the story crackles with anticipation that a whole new phase of God's work is about to break forth. And so it does.

Of course, a lot has happened since that Pentecost launch of the Christian movement. The gospel message has pretty well gone out to the whole world. In fact, in some places the excitement of hearing the message is old stuff and people are quietly leaving Christianity.

In our church we are busy welcoming a Korean congregation. We're hiring a church hostess and catching our breath before all the warm weather activities for the kids—vacation Bible School and so on. We've got this economy and its impact on the church budget.

And up looms this story of our beginning. It cuts through the clutter of the announcements and schedule and reminds us of who we are and why we're here. "In our beginning is our end."

One detail to notice is that in the first place the people prayed. We're accustomed to hearing that the disciples had to wait for the Holy Spirit before God got the Christian Church going. But we might also say that the Holy Spirit waited for the people's prayer before moving powerfully. This isn't the first time that God moves in decisive ways only in response to his peoples' prayer. It

wasn't until the Hebrew slaves were praying desperately for help that God chose to intervene. You've got to wonder if they would still be in Egypt if they hadn't prayed.

Now, if our beginning is our end, it follows that prayer is an essential part of our whole mission. Here we are witnessing a sea change in our understanding and participation in Christian faith. Are we praying about it? Are we asking God to move to revive the church? Are we praying for a fresh dose of the Holy Spirit to awaken and enlighten and energize God's people?

We do, I believe, pray for personal matters, that God will comfort people who are struggling. We pray with gratitude. Do we pray for big stuff like for God to bring a fresh outbreak of faith? Prayer was indispensable to our beginning. How about now?

A second insight resident in this story is the simple observation of what the Holy Spirit actually does upon arrival with the 120 disciples. The message gets out there. What disciples have to deliver to the world is a grand truth. It's a truth about what God has done in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

There was a large and troubled Presbyterian Church located about five miles from my congregation in Dayton, Ohio. For a couple of years its key new-member strategy

was to put on musicals and have dinner theater. The pastor explained that young couples responded to the arts and working together on a theatrical production. That lasted for a couple of shows and then there was a church fight and much upheaval, a new pastor and a smaller congregation.

Now I tell you this, not because there's anything wrong with musicals. But as a strategy to create disciples of Jesus Christ, there is not a chance that a stage play will have the slightest lasting impact. Because the essential work of the church is to carry a message.

What does matter? The word of God; the glad tidings of the gospel. I think of the Chinese intellectual Lin Yutang, a dedicated Marxist and intellectual. In his sixties, he finds himself listening to the preaching of David H. C. Read in New York City. Something stirs in him. There's a freshness and power about the ideas he's hearing that draws him back and back.

The story of the Word of God awakening people, transforming people and the world never ends. Did you notice that the crowd that gathered around the Apostles on Pentecost were devout Jews from all over the world? They were not uneducated street people. The congregation that Peter preached to was sophisticated. They prayed. They knew the Scripture. What they heard burned its way to

their hearts. It stirred them. Confused them, changed them. Let's never forget that our essential mission is as servants of the Word. We don't all preach or teach. But all of us convey a truth to a world desperate for truth.

A final detail. There's a phrase in our text that reads: "Are not all those who are speaking Galileans?" The large Pentecost crowd recognized the dialect of the Galileans. Apparently, the Holy Spirit enabled the Apostles to speak in different languages but didn't take out the accent! God isn't interested in making us perfect, standardized robots in order to carry his message. God works with us just as we are—personality, style, attitudes, background.

Galileans, by the way, had a reputation as poor speakers. Peter himself had just refused to acknowledge Jesus during Jesus' trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin. Now, Peter is up there suddenly faithful to Christ, in all his Galilean glory.

None of us can say, "I'm not very good at talking about my faith, I'm not very good reaching out and befriending, I'm not very good at serving. Well, neither were the Galileans. And they rocked the world!

So, what are we learning about ourselves as we look at our beginning? Prayer matters...a lot. We can do that! The

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heart of our mission is a word that makes alive. Let us be generous with what we've been given. That word still changes the world. And even Galileans can do it. With the Spirit's help. God is ready to fill us and use us just as we are. Accent, background, personality, foibles, and all.