

May 31 2009

The Transforming Power of the Holy Spirit Acts 2:1-4

Today is Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost means fifty in Greek. It refers to the fifty days after the Lord's resurrection. The people who witnessed the Lord's Ascension had waited for the Holy Spirit that the Lord promised to send them. At last the Holy Spirit came down on the tenth day after His Ascension.

The first Pentecost was a day frightening but powerful. On that day an unexpected happening occurred. Nobody knew what it was at first.

I read a frightening but a powerful story about a Dutch pastor and his family during the Second World War. This pastor got into big trouble with the Nazis. They had been hiding Jewish people in their home to keep them safe from Hitler's forces. They were eventually found out, and one night in the darkness, they heard the sound of heavy boots and loud, impatient knocking on the door.

They were seized and loaded into a cattle car to be taken to one of notorious death camps. All night long, the pastor and his family rode in heartbreaking anguish, jostling against one another and the other prisoners who were jammed into the car. They were stripped of any form of dignity and absolutely terrified. They knew they were being taken to one of Hitler's extermination centers. But, which one would it be? Would it be Auschwitz, Buchenwald, or Dachau?

Finally, the long night ended and the train stopped. The doors of the cattle car were opened and light streamed into that tragic scene. They were marched out and lined up beside the railroad tracks, and resigned to unspeakable pain as they knew they would be separated from one another and ultimately killed. But in the midst of their gloom, they discovered some amazing good news – good news beyond belief! They discovered, in the bright morning sunlight, that they were not in a death camp at all, not in Germany at all, but in Switzerland! During the night, someone, through personal courage and daring, had tripped a switch and sent the train to Switzerland – and freedom. And those now who came to them were not their captors at all, but their liberators. Instead of being marched to death, they were welcomed to new life.

The first Pentecost was a happening somewhat like that. They were gathered and hidden for ten days after the Lord's Ascension at Mark's upper room. There were two reasons for their gathering: for waiting the Lord's promise and supporting each other because they had lost the Lord completely. They needed a place to hide themselves from the persecution of the Pharisees, the religious authority. And, they needed to support each other because they didn't have concrete directions for the future.

There was confusion, ambiguity, uncertainty, no direction, and anxiety while they were waiting for the Lord's promise for ten days. They didn't know how much longer they

should wait. There were mixtures in their faith: expectation and weariness, faith and despair, being challenged and hidden with anxiety for tomorrow. They had waited but nothing had happened.

For today's Pentecost worship we decorated the sanctuary in red. The flame, fans and water jar are placed on the front of the sanctuary to symbolize the Holy Spirit. Symbols of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit that recur in the Hebrew Bible include wind, fire, water, dove and the oil of anointing. These types and metaphors dramatically coalesced in the event of the Pentecost: "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting," and "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit," who appeared to them as flaming tongues parting asunder so as to settle upon each one of them (Acts 2:-4); they received the promised "baptism with the Spirit and with fire" (Matt. 3:11), after which they preached the baptism of repentance (Acts 13:24); and they received the anointing of the Spirit that was promised to be poured out in the last days (Acts 2:17, 33; Titus 3:5,6).

We can see some phenomena in the Pentecost signifying the Holy Spirit in the Scripture, Acts 2:1-4. There are four symbols of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in this Scripture. I would like to share with you these transforming powers of the Holy Spirit.

First, we find that the Holy Spirit is represented as an Invisible Wind.

What is the Holy Spirit? If the Holy Spirit may be symbolized as an invisible wind, then what is the wind? A boy asks a sailor "Tell me. What is the wind?" The Old Sailor replies, "I don't quite know how to describe the wind, but I will teach you how it hoists a sail."

In speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus compared the Spirit to the wind that moves where it wills. One cannot account precisely from where it comes or goes or why. Similarly, we are born of God from above by the Spirit. The Spirit of God is that invisible, enabling agent by which God's power becomes manifest while remaining unseen. The Hebrew word, "ruach" is often used for the spirit of God, meaning the out-breathing, the proceeding, the going forth of the life of God.

As we use invisible wind to speak words and convey meanings, so God's unseen Spirit is moving by silent means to convey God's revelation. There was communication among those gathered at the first Pentecost, though the people to whom the disciples preached had come from different parts of the ancient world, speaking different languages. The Holy Spirit made communication possible among them in different languages.

Secondly, we find that the Holy Spirit is represented as Cleansing Water. The Spirit is typified by water, a symbol for cleansing, reviving, and refreshing, without which life does not long continue. Tertullian said, "Water is a perfect, glad, simple material substance. Pure in itself that supplies a worthy vehicle to God."

As the Son, the living water, cleanses the faithful from all unrighteousness, so the faithful are cleansed of sin by the Spirit, who like a deep source of spring water renews the believer steadily.

The Spirit, like water, is life-giving, revitalizing. Jesus said, in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

The gifts at Pentecost were confirmed by baptism in cleansing, purifying, life-giving water.

A few years ago a noted Medical School graduation commencement was held. During his speech, the president of the Medical School stood to give his address, looked out into the sea of future doctors, graduates, seated before him, and said, “Doctors, wash your hands!” Then, he sat down. That was the shortest speech (and thus a famous speech) on record. “Brothers, clean your hearts and be baptized!” was the famous speech of Peter. The Holy Spirit is the cleansing power of repentance from our sins.

Thirdly, we find that the Holy Spirit is represented as Purging (purifying) Fire. The Holy Spirit warms us and melts our cold, cold hearts. Fire could symbolize both the coming of God’s grace toward those who were responsive and the rejection of sin by the holiness of God, whose anger against sin is like a consuming fire. Fire both “improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble.” By fire the dross is burned away and the purer elements conserved. His gold needs his flame.

Once upon a time, there was a piece of iron that was very strong and very hard. Many attempts had been made to break it, but all had failed.

“I’ll master it,” said the ax. And his blows fell heavily upon the piece of iron, but every blow only made the ax’s edge merely blunt, until it finally ceased to strike and gave up in frustration.

“Leave it to me,” said the saw, and it worked back and forth on the iron’s surface until its jagged teeth were all worn and broken. In despair, the saw quit trying and fell to the ground.

“Shall I try?” asked the small, soft flame.

“Forget it,” everyone else said. “What can you do? You’re too small, and you have no strength.” But the small, soft flame cured around the piece of iron, embraced it, and never stopped until the iron melted under its warm, irresistible influence.

God’s way is not to break hearts, but to melt them. And this is our calling – melt hearts, under the irresistible warmth of God’s graciousness. The Holy Spirit melts our hardened hearts and twisted minds to be transformed and straightened.

Fourthly, the Holy Spirit is represented to us as a Guileless (innocent) Dove. Gentleness, grace, beauty, guileless, at Jesus' baptism the Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove from heaven to earth, resting upon him.

In the history of the Korean Methodist Church, there is reported an interesting occurrence during one of their general conferences. At general conference, they elect one bishop every four years. Since there is only one seat for bishop, the election of bishop has been a top issue during Korean Methodist General Conferences. There are many groups that campaign to get their candidate for bishop elected to the position.

On one such General Conference of the Korean Methodist Church, the delegates had cast their ballots thirty nine times for the election of a bishop, but still had not yet been able to elect anyone to the post. After finishing the fortieth ballot, the chairman called for a pause to sing a hymn. And then, suddenly, a dove flew into the sanctuary where the meeting was being held, and flying downward in circles, finally landed on a minister's shoulder during the hymn. Then, everybody stood and praised the minister on whom the dove sat. Without another ballot, the minister was introduced and was accepted as the new bishop unanimously. The members of the general conference were so naïve as to accept the scene of a dove landing as the descending of the Holy Spirit.

The dove was a figure or type of Spirit suggesting peace, gentleness, grace, beauty and guilelessness. God chooses the meek and melts, molds and uses them. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth."

Once Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Reflecting on this, Peter's saying, a priest in medieval Europe lamented, "Silver and gold we have plenty but we do not have that which Peter has."

The transforming power is not silver or gold, nor material. It is neither physical nor worldly power. It is not visible or external power. Rather, it is the invisible and spiritual power that is transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Let's take the torch of the flame and march for Christ's ministry with great, renewed commitment.