

When the Spirit Blows In

Shortly after I arrived at Princeton Seminary, a classmate of mine invited me to attend her church with her. It was about forty-five minutes away, and as we left to go to church she informed me that we would eat at the church and she'd have me home around 4. I distinctly remember that it was 10 a.m. when this conversation took place.

"Just what in the world are we going to do all day," I asked?

"Well, we're going to church."

"For four hours?"

"Yes," she said, "Unless the preacher is particularly longwinded today."

What followed was a four-hour crash course in charismatic Pentecostal worship. The choir was loud, the drums were beating, and energy sort of pulsed through the congregation. The preacher stood up and was thundering about justice, and folks were hollering back at him, "Amen" and so forth. Every once in a while, someone would say, "Help him, Lord."

My host leaned over and translated this for me; it meant the preacher was on dangerous ground and needed to change course.

Then, when I didn't think worship could get any more energetic, it went up to eleven. The choir was dancing back and forth, the preacher was preaching up a storm. It was the middle of July and I had already sweated through my suit coat. Then an immaculately dressed older woman, who looked like a strong wind might just blow her away, stood up. Again, there was a whispered worship rubric in my ear, "She's about to prophesy!"

At that moment, this tiny woman burst into a full-throated proclamation in words that were unintelligible to me and it was as if electricity shot through the congregation. Then I noticed some women dressed in white flanking the prophet, and my friend again leaned over and said, "They think she's going to be slain in the spirit."

This was all very, very new to me.

What I can tell you now, nearly twenty-five years later, about that moment in that worship service was that something palpably *real* had happened. I didn't understand it; I had no idea what the prophet said. But I knew something *had* happened, something my very Presbyterian background *never* prepared me to encounter.

Later, I asked my friend, "I don't understand it. Something very tangible happened, but I didn't understand a word she was saying."

She replied, "You may never understand it. It may not be your spiritual gift to understand it. Don't feel bad, it's not your faith tradition and that may not be how the Spirit reaches you. But now you respect that it's how the Spirit reaches us, don't you?"

And what made that a watershed moment was that I hadn't always seen it that way. I had understood the second chapter of Acts to mean exactly what it read, that each understood in their own language what was being proclaimed. I always assumed that the Greeks heard Greek, the Israelites heard Hebrew, the Medes and Parthians heard Parthian and whatever Medes speak. But get this: there hadn't been any Medes or Parthians around for a few hundred years. They would have had to have jumped time as well as space to be present at Pentecost. Whatever happened that first Pentecost, we can't reduce it to pure linguistics. And I learned something that day: she didn't have to be wrong for me to be right. God was working through both of our experiences of church. The paradigm of Christian faith shifted a bit beneath my feet with the realization that the work of the Spirit is not a zero-sum game.

Has that ever happened to you?

Have you ever had that moment where suddenly *it all changed*?

That's what happened on Pentecost. All the text tells us is that a huge sound rushed through the house. It was as though the wind was blowing. The Spirit rested on each as if a tongue of fire, and suddenly languages weren't an obstacle anymore.

Languages, you recall, were an obstacle from just about the very beginning of the Bible. Languages *united* tribes and sects – being able to communicate is important – and languages *divided* the tribes and the sects from one another. Genesis uses the story of the scrambling of our languages as an object lesson on the danger of pride and confusing ourselves with God. We are told that people were scattered from one another with their languages; divided up into groups that shared a common tongue.

And then, all the sudden, no more. Just like that, in the power of God, everything changed.

Everything changed... Peter, Jesus' disciple who timidly huddled around the fire with strangers after the trial of Jesus, who spat out his terrified denial that he *even* knew Jesus, was transformed from the frequently stumbling fisherman who alternated between declaring that Jesus is the Christ to denying him three times into a preacher.

He stood and preached. In the power of the Spirit, he stood and preached.

This past week someone said to me, about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit, "Some people who claim to have the Holy Spirit make me nervous."

Now, let's be honest. I know a great number of Christians, Presbyterian and otherwise, who would agree! There's something about the Spirit that we're not quite comfortable with – forget that Jesus called the Spirit the advocate and the comforter – what's to be uncomfortable with that?

Nonetheless people get a little leery of the Spirit. Particularly Presbyterians.

It's not our lingua franca, and we humans are known to get nervous about what we don't understand. Maybe I'm wrong but I think there's just something very unsettling to a lot of people about the idea that the Spirit could just blow right on in here and change things.

I think we're secretly afraid that we might start speaking in tongues.

But isn't the belief that the Spirit of God actually changes things central to our faith?

I've never forgotten a particularly boring Presbytery committee meeting I was in. Our Presbytery executive was covering some rather normal details – the sorts of mundane things every minister has to deal with. When he came to the end of his report, he began to talk about an immigrant fellowship that was meeting down in south Atlanta and how they wanted to build a building; they wanted a place in their community to mark their presence. And then, and this is the absolute truth, the door from outside blew open.

One of us got up and shut the door and Tom continued speaking. And as he continued to speak, he grew more and more passionate about our commitment to this immigrant fellowship, about how a presbytery that claims to be the churches of Jesus Christ of the Presbyterian variety, cannot turn its back on those in our midst who yearn to have what we have – not out of grasping for stuff, but out of a sense of calling to make their presence known in their community. As he was speaking, tears began rolling down his face and when he was done, he abruptly stopped and sat down. At the moment that he stopped speaking, there was a pregnant pause until finally and a woman on our committee broke the holy silence with the words, "Let us pray."

"Gracious God, your spirit has blown into this room," she prayed.

When the Spirit blows in, things get unsettled.

When the Spirit blows in, everything changes.

If we're satisfied with the way things are, when the Spirit blows in, we may begin to squirm just a bit. We may begin fidgeting because, whether we heard tongues – foreign languages, or *glossolalia*, the angelic language of the Pentecostal tradition, whatever the Spirit's movement, it is a cosmos-shaking, change-making, electrifying encounter.

The Spirit does that to the church every once in a while.

If we get worried about the pace of change in the world, the change for good that the church is supposed to drive, it's useful to remember from time to time that it took God about 1500 years to get around to reforming the church the *first* time.

I wonder if that puts in perspective some of the processes of change we see in our lives. So often it is when we look *back* that we see the Spirit at work. I, for instance, didn't realize when I was sitting in that charismatic church listening to the preacher and the prophet that the Spirit was

at work on me: reshaping the way I viewed worship and church and the diverse richness of God's people in whom God delights.

Encountering the Holy Spirit *ought* to make us unsettled. We don't get to decide when and where the Spirit will work. Frankly, despite the fact that I might have a list of personal projects that I would like the Holy Spirit to take on, God does not appear at present to have consulted me on the Spirit's work-flow in the global church or on myself.

Which brings me to my final point: I have been talking about the work of the Spirit on us in the corporate sense. And yes, we are being shaped and changed and moved by God all the time. But there is another element I wish to leave you with: that of the Spirit moving on us – you and me - personally.

You see, we are all redeemed and we are also in the *process* of being redeemed. We're works in progress, every one of us. We don't see the final product. We get a glimpse, now and then, but rarely more. But we know that God is working for the good.

There are, to be sure, times when the good seems so far off. There are times when the waited for, hoped for redemption that we need in our lives, the justice the preacher was preaching for, the healing the prophet promised, seem so far off as to be unreachable.

It is in those moments that the Spirit prays for us, Paul says, with sighs too deep for words¹, *with sighs too deep for words*.

The Holy Spirit, present at creation, present at the baptism of Jesus, present all the time between you and me, prays for you and for me. The universe-making, cosmos-shaking, reformation causing Spirit prays for you and for me, to keep us faithful until that day when it is all changed, when more than we could ever ask or imagine is realized.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

¹ Romans 8:26