

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, May 16, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"LIKE WIND AND FIRE"

Acts 2:1-4

In a Peanuts cartoon, Lucy says to Charlie Brown: "You know what I don't understand? I don't understand love!" Charlie says, "Who does?" Lucy says, "Explain love to me, Charlie Brown." He says, "You can't explain love." Lucy comes back, "Well, try, Charlie Brown, try." Charlie says, "Well, let's say I see this beautiful, cute little girl walk by." Lucy interrupts: "Why does she have to be cute? Huh? Why can't someone fall in love with freckles and a big nose? Explain that!" Charlie, "Well, maybe you're right. Let's say I see this girl walk by with this great big nose..." Lucy: "I didn't say GREAT BIG NOSE." By now Charlie has had enough; he sighs and says, "You not only can't explain love, you can't even talk about it."

Well today, we're not going to talk about love, let alone explain it. We're going to talk about the Holy Spirit, who may be just as difficult to explain. In Acts 2 we read about the coming of the Holy Spirit, that mysterious event which happened at Pentecost 10 days after the Risen Christ had returned to heaven. This was an event almost beyond explanation. The followers of Jesus were waiting in the Upper Room, in obedience to Jesus' word, for the promise of the Father. Then suddenly "...from heaven there came the sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." The crowds in Jerusalem were amazed and perplexed as they heard these ordinary men preaching the mighty acts of God so that everyone could understand. They asked "What does this mean?" Some in the crowd even thought that they must be drunk. But Peter raised his voice, and told them that this was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as was foretold by Joel long before. "In the last days, it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh."

Now if you had asked the disciples what the experience of the Holy Spirit was all about they might have had trouble giving a real explanation. "We can't really explain it," they might have said, "But the coming of the Holy Spirit was like a mighty wind. The Holy Spirit was like tongues of fire."

Now at Pentecost the Holy Spirit was indeed poured out for all of us. He is a person of the Holy Trinity. He is God active in the world today. He is God's gift to

all believers. The Holy Spirit is God with us and in us now. But the Spirit's work is better experienced than explained. In fact, we can use these same ancient symbols to describe our experience of the Holy Spirit's work in us and in the world today. The Holy Spirit is like wind and fire.

The Holy Spirit is like fire burning within us. We speak about a person being "fired up" or inspired. And that is what the Holy Spirit is like. He fires us up in the Christian faith and life.

For one thing the Spirit burns within us to convict us of our sin and convince us that we need the Saviour. Jesus said of the Spirit, "He will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement..." In fact, before we became Christian believers that was the main work of the Spirit in us. He worked to convict you of your sin and lead you to Christ so that by faith in Christ you became a forgiven and redeemed child of God. And that same Holy Spirit burns within us now. The Holy Spirit is our God-inspired conscience, stirring up feelings of regret, sometimes even burning feelings, over our sin and unrighteousness. But he doesn't leave us there. The Holy Spirit always leads us to Christ. That's the difference between the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of human conscience alone. Our human conscience may stir up feelings of regret within us, but leaves us on our own to do something about them. Our human conscience convicts us but does not bring us grace.

I was in the parking lot last week at the Credit Valley Hospital. A woman couldn't find her parked car. She pressed the button on her key which set off the horn. On and on the horn sounded for what seemed like forever. Do you know what a horn sounds like when it constantly blares in an enclosed concrete parking lot? If you wanted to drive someone mad, just expose them to that for a few hours. I said to her, "What level did you park on?" "Level 4", she said, even though she was now on level 3. I said, "I think you're on the right level," and I pointed to the direction from which I thought the sound was coming. As I walked down the stairs I finally heard the horn stop. The Holy Spirit is something like that. He sets off the alarm in our conscience but stops it too, as he leads us to Christ for the forgiveness of our sin and the refreshment of our souls.

Here is another way the Holy Spirit is like fire burning within us. He fires us up over the injustices suffered by others. Now on the human level we often get very fired up and self-righteous over injustices to ourselves. But the Holy Spirit stirs us up over injustices done to others. The Holy Spirit burns within us so we say, "This is not right", and we may even get fired up enough to do something about it. Have you ever felt a burning inside over something that happened to someone that was unfair and just plain wrong? That's the Holy Spirit. Social wrongs begin

to get righted when the Holy Spirit burns within people and they say, "No more of this," from the ending of the slave trade, to the overcoming of racial barriers, to the provision of affordable housing in a city like ours, to the feeding of the hungry.

Here's another way we experience the Holy Spirit as fire. The Holy Spirit burns within us and confirms for us the truth of God's word. After the Risen Christ instructed two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they asked one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he opened to us the Scriptures?" John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed as he heard a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans being read one evening at a church in London. And from Wesley's experience came the Methodist expression of Protestant faith in which we stand. Most of you have had the experience of hearing and reading scripture sometime and knowing that it was from God, and that it was for you. A warming in your heart transferred to your mind and you knew that "This word is a true word from God!"

Sometimes people say to us, "How do you know your faith is true?" Now we must always be ready to gently give a reason for our hope but sometimes you just can't quite explain it intellectually, no more than you can explain why you love your spouse. You just do. It's the same with faith. You have to say, "I just believe." And that's because the Holy Spirit has burned the truth of faith on your heart. The Holy Spirit burns within us to confirm the truth of God's word.

The Holy Spirit is not only like fire burning within us; **the Spirit is like wind at our back.** You see, the Holy Spirit as fire and the Holy Spirit as wind really go together. The Holy Spirit fires us up and then same Holy Spirit moves us into action, like wind catching the sail of a ship and moving it forward.

That's what happened to the disciples in the Upper Room. They were fired up with the Gospel message and the truth of Christ incarnate, crucified and Risen. They were fired up about the mighty acts of God. And then like the rush of a mighty wind the Holy Spirit came and pushed them out into the streets of Jerusalem to preach the Gospel in many languages so all could hear and understand.

Now the Holy Spirit may not move us to do that, though the Holy Spirit does move people today to go forth and preach the Gospel. But Christians do experience God's Holy Spirit as the wind, that power which comes and moves us beyond ourselves to do God's calling, to do things that we can not do on human strength and ability alone. The Holy Spirit may be like a gentle breeze or a raging wind. But either way, he is like the wind at our back, moving us into action, empowering us to do the things that we might not think we can do. We feel

ourselves being carried along by a power greater than ourselves.

On my first pastoral charge in Cape Breton Island there was a lake in front of the house I lived in. One brisk winter's day I went skating on the lake with some teenagers from the congregation. The wind was strong and we could skate effortlessly with the wind at our backs. We felt free and empowered. We went out a mile onto the lake pushed along by the wind. Of course, there was much more effort involved in coming back. But with the wind at our backs it was a wonderful experience.

The Holy Spirit is like the wind at our back, pushing us forward, taking us beyond ourselves, doing things in Christ's Name that we never thought we could do, taking us farther and faster than we could possibly go on our own. I certainly have felt the Holy Spirit moving me, especially in times when I felt my own weakness. A presence drew near and moved me and enabled me to do what God called me to do. The Spirit does that for the church too. He is God's power which moves the church outward in mission to the world.

No, you may not be called to go out and preach about God's mighty acts in the streets. But God is calling each of us to attempt something for His Kingdom that stretches us and moves us beyond our comfort zone. When the Holy Spirit fires us up for mission, he then comes like the wind to move us into action. So we can respond to God's call trusting that God will supernaturally empower us for the task. We will not be acting on our own, but with divine assistance.

Now we can't control the Holy Spirit anymore than we can control the wind. But we can set up the conditions for its coming. You notice when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost the disciples doing exactly what Jesus had told them to do - they were together and they were waiting in the Upper Room for the promise of the Father. The Holy Spirit comes as wind and fire to those who listen to God's word, who seek God, and earnestly desire to do his will.

A young boy and an old sailor were talking about the wind. "Explain the wind to me," the boy said. "I can't," said the old sailor. "But I know how to hoist a sail." And that's the way it is for Christians. We can't really explain the Holy Spirit. But God has showed us how to hoist a sail and catch the winds of the Spirit. We hoist a sail through faith, through worship, through prayer, through obedience to God's word. Do these things, and you will know and experience the power of God's Holy Spirit in your life. The Holy Spirit is like wind and fire. On this Pentecost Sunday may you feel the fire of God's Holy Spirit burning within you and may you leave here with the wind of God's Holy Spirit blowing at your back.