



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Unstoppable Power of the Spirit  
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 11, 2008  
*Pentecost Sunday*  
Acts 2:1-21

For Luke, there is a strong connection between Jesus' baptism and his ministry. The power of the Spirit is the thread linking these movements together—the Spirit descends in baptism; after baptism, Jesus is filled with the Spirit; the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness; then, Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit begins to teach. Finally, when Jesus' public ministry begins at Nazareth, this is what we hear: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...”

Luke's story of the resurrection isn't finished until Pentecost. One of the features of Luke-Acts is the tension of absence and presence. Empty tomb—absence; resurrection appearances—presence; Ascension—absence; Pentecost—present in a new way in the power of the Spirit. Luke's story of what happened on Pentecost, then, is in reality another resurrection account—the risen Jesus is now present among us in a radically new way, through the power of the Spirit.

But you've got to admit, it's a strange story. When it comes to special effects, Hollywood has nothing on the church's story of Pentecost. Try as they might, the Hollywood movers and shakers could never do justice to the church's story of Pentecost, a story where every phrase of every sentence seems to describe something more wonderfully strange than the one before.

It's now been nearly two thousand years since that amazing Pentecost Sunday, and we're still trying to imagine real flames dancing over real heads, and the cacophony of sound somehow making sense. It's a fantastic story, but let's admit it: it's also a story which strains even our most-active imaginations.

So what are we, who are sitting in a modern church faced with challenges too numerous to count, to make of it? That's the question that I've struggled with in preparing for this sermon, and, to be honest, it's the same question I struggle with each year at Pentecost. How are we to understand this strangely wonderful story?

Many of you will remember the question that one of my seminary professors encouraged us to ask of stories in the Bible: “What's present at the end of the story that wasn't there at the beginning?” When I asked that of the church's Pentecost story, the answer leaped off the page.

At the beginning of the story, Luke tells us, there were about 120 followers of Jesus sitting in an upper room. All of them are moping around about what they were going to do without Jesus. They were a church lacking vision and purpose with little hope of survival in the political and religious culture of their time. At the beginning of the Pentecost story, the church has some people, but no power.

But jump to the end of the story. There we see a church not trapped in some upper room, but down in the streets, speaking the people's language. We see a church that

added 3000 members that very day. We see a church, who Peter, quoting the prophet Joel, says is dreaming dreams and seeing visions. What we see at the end of the story is a church with power for ministry. The church struggling for survival and bereft of vision is suddenly “gone with the wind” as a new church blows in, a new church enlivened by the unstoppable power of God’s Spirit.

As wild as its features are, the church’s Pentecost story shouts a single truth: it is the Spirit of God alone who gives life to the church.

There. We’ve stumbled upon what we in the modern church are to make of this story. In doing so, we’ve also danced dangerously close to what I think is the modern church’s greatest temptation, namely, to think that it is our power and our creativity and our faithfulness that moves the church. The temptation is to forget the central truth of this Pentecost story: it is the Spirit alone who gives life to the church.

We talked about this in our officer training this year. We also talked about it a bit at our staff planning retreat this past Wednesday. Even though we want to be sure to welcome, encourage, support, and call out all of our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love from each member of this community, there is always a need to recognize that it is the Spirit who really moves the church.

One of my favorite theologians, Douglas John Hall wrote a three volume set of books which describe Christianity in the North American context. In *Confessing the Faith*, the last book in the series, he discusses this reality of the church today. He writes, “When faith professes that the life of the church depends upon the Holy Spirit, it is *denying*...the tendency of (the Church) to assume, namely that the life of the church is dependent upon *us*: our activities, our ‘belief,’ our financial and other good works.” He goes on to conclude that section with a stinging observation: “When the life of the church is thought to be ‘our’ responsibility; when people become concerned about ‘keeping the church alive,’ and ‘giving it a future,’ this can almost always be taken as a sign of the loss of any real sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit. A church that through the power of the Holy Spirit is being caused to live does not spend much of its energy upon its own preservation; it is too much concerned for the preservation of the world God loves.” (Hall, *Confessing the Faith*, 60)

The story of Pentecost shouts across the centuries to the modern church: “The Spirit is the power of the church.” It speaks to us of power for ministry and mission. It’s a frightening thing to think about trusting the Spirit and discerning the Spirit’s leading instead of trusting in our own efforts. And what it takes more than anything else is a recommitment to the study of scripture and the worship of God by this community so that we recognize the voice of God when we hear it. It’s time for the church to discern the Spirit in the air.

In his two-part narrative, Luke has told an amazing story. In his gospel, he tells the story of all that happened when Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit. It was clear: for Luke, everything that Jesus did—all the teaching; all the miracles—happened by the power of the Spirit. In the Book of Acts, Luke tells the continuing story of Jesus by telling of all that the disciples did in the name of the Lord. It was clear: for Luke, everything that the church did—all the teaching; all the welcoming; the mission to the ends of

the earth—the church did by the power of the Spirit.

Taken together, Luke's story of Jesus and the story of the early church reveal a world that is far from nailed down, where the Spirit invites bold, boundary-shattering, world-transforming ministry for the sake of the kingdom. Should we in the church today really expect anything different from this radical mission to the world God loves, if we follow where the unstoppable power of the Spirit leads?