

DRESSED FOR ACTION

Acts 2: Pentecost

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Choosing an outfit for any given day or occasion can be a big deal. A clothing decision is seldom as simple as any old thing will do. Questions abound. What is appropriate for the season? What is the occasion? Who will be there? Is this the outfit I wore the last time I was with those people? Do I want to look sporty, professional, casual, young, mature? The look is important. Did you see all of the hats worn by women at the Kentucky Derby? I'm guessing that only a few of those women wear those hats any other time, but hats are the look of the day. The look is important. Some close to me have told me that I have mastered the dull, balding, middle-aged-guy look. I suppose I should be insulted, but I am just glad they call me middle-aged. Is it important to you to wear designer labels? Do you like bold colors? Do you lean toward prep or grunge or surfer dude or gothic or button down or boater? A lot of thought goes into what we wear because our choice of clothes can send a message. So, we choose our outfits carefully.

Given this fact, it is interesting to see how the Holy Spirit chose to outfit itself on the Day of Pentecost. Now Pentecost, of course, was not the first time the Holy Spirit had appeared. You might recall, for instance, that the Spirit had descended upon Jesus at his baptism. That day it had come dressed as a dove. In a resurrection appearance, the Holy Spirit came dressed as the breath of God, breathed on the disciples by Jesus.

Ah, but the Spirit dressed differently on Pentecost. In Acts, we do not read that the followers were all together in one place and a dove came into the midst of them or that the disciples felt the breath of God on their cheeks. No, we read, "...the followers were together in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind! It filled the house where they were meeting. Then they saw what looked like fiery tongues moving in all directions, and a tongue came and settled on each person there." The Holy Spirit, which had come to Jesus dressed as a dove, conveying gentleness, promise, and peace, came to the apostles dressed as wind and fire, conveying power and passion. The change in outfit conveyed a different message.

Wind and fire are not gentle, nor peaceful. Oh, a summer breeze might be gentle, even faint, but wind is anything but. Wind can bend large trees and pull them up by the roots. Wind can lift large objects and toss them about. Wind can stir the sea into a frenzy. Wind is a driving force that literally moves across the face of the earth.

Fire consumes. Controlled, it cooks our food and warms our bodies and maybe

even lights our way. Fire, though, resists control. In the forest fires that so often rage in the west, the fire might actually be put out, only to start up miles away because it burned through the root systems until it found an opening to again surface. They say the haze in the air the other day was actually smoke from the fires burning in Canada! The heat from fire is overwhelming. It is why we talk about fire when we talk about anger or temper or passion or love – emotions that have a bright, burning, raging, and consuming quality about them.

This is how the Holy Spirit came dressed to Pentecost. Why? Because the Spirit was coming to equip the apostles with courage for a miracle-working mission.

Remember the situation. It was Pentecost, a scripture proscribed annual Jewish harvest festival. Technically it is the Festival of Weeks, but is called Pentecost because it is celebrated fifty days after Passover, or fifty days after Easter for Christians. Jews, now dispersed throughout all of the countries surrounding Israel and beyond, were in Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices at the Temple and to meet up with extended family and friends for a big party. It was Memorial Day weekend and Thanksgiving rolled into one. The followers of Jesus were there too. They were there because they did not know where else to go or what else to do. Of course, you can expect that they were out and about. After all, they had experienced the most incredible experience any person could have. They had walked and talked with the Lord Jesus. They had witnessed his miracles, heard his teaching, sat at his feet, received his blessing. They had watched him die, but they had also seen his resurrected body. They actually were with him after he had risen from the dead and they had seen him ascend to heaven.

So naturally they were telling anyone and everyone they could about all that had happened, right? That would be wrong. They were telling no one. They stayed together in their own tight circle telling each other about the good news of Christ. They did not know what else to do. They were afraid of the authorities. They felt inadequate as evangelists. They were not writers or speakers and certainly not rabbis. So, this group, hand-picked by Christ to be his messengers, was instead living life in a corner.

That was unacceptable. Jesus had not come to touch a hundred people or so. He had come to bring salvation to the entire world. It was up to this timid bunch to get the word out. So it is that the Holy Spirit came upon them – dramatically. Just as the wind does not stay contained but blows to all corners of the world, so their mission would be worldwide. Just as fire burns hot, so their passion for the Word of God would burn.

Empowered by the dressed for action Spirit, they engaged that international crowd in Jerusalem that day and, as a result of Peter's powerful preaching, thousands came forward to be baptized. That was only one day, though, and only the beginning.

The Spirit stayed with them. The apostles continued preaching and teaching and healing in Jerusalem. When the authorities arrested them and commanded them to stop, they said no way, we obey God, not you. They began to move out throughout the Roman Empire, to Greece, Rome, Asia Minor, eastern and northern Europe, and northern Africa. We do not know their exact travels and all of their stories, but we know Christianity was being spread, and these once timid and insecure followers accepted persecution, prison, stoning, beheading, and crucifixion. Once the wind blew them on their way and the fire burned within their souls, they were unstoppable. It is fair to say that we sit here today, in a Christian church, believers in Christ Jesus, because one day long ago the Holy Spirit came dressed as wind and fire.

Of course, just as the Day of Pentecost was only the beginning of the Christian mission, it was also only one day in the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit continues to be active in the lives of believers on a daily basis.

The Spirit does not always come dressed as wind and fire. It may come dressed as a dove, perhaps at baptism or maybe in hospice. Given that Jesus called the Spirit a comforter, it might come to us in times of grief and sorrow dressed as a priest, or counselor, or grandmother, or a friend. In scripture the Spirit is sometimes called an advocate. Have you seen the Spirit dressed as one who speaks on your behalf? The Spirit is a gift-giver. I cannot picture the Spirit dressed as a commercial Santa Claus, but maybe as some form of St. Nicholas. The outfit the Spirit chooses to wear can tell us a lot about the Spirit's purpose.

Including the outfit of wind and fire. For while it is true that the Spirit gives to us spiritual gifts, and advocates for us, and comforts us, and brings us peace, it is also true that the Holy Spirit motivates us to keep the mission moving. The work of the apostles is not done. The Lord intends for everyone to hear the good news of the gospel, for each and every person to have opportunity to commit his or her life to Christ. Consequently, it is not acceptable for believers to sit isolated in their churches telling each other about Jesus, any more than it was acceptable for the disciples to sit in a locked room while an international gathering was taking place right outside the door. Get up and get out, the Spirit said and says. I am lighting a fire and spreading it with the wind. We read it in Revelation today. God is not impressed with the lukewarm. Oh that you were hot or cold, Jesus told the church, clearly preferring hot, for heat signals a passion for sharing the good news of Christ.

And it is good news to be shared, news that needs to be heard. It occurs to me that on that day of Pentecost, a room full of believers were gathered behind locked doors, but the marketplace was jammed packed with thousands. Hmmm. Here we have a room

full of believers inside while the market place is jammed packed with thousands, a pattern replicated wherever there is a church – far more outside than inside. And those outside are not bad people, uncaring people, or unlovable people. The vast majority are exactly like you and I are, with the possible exception that they have become disconnected from Christ, or lukewarm toward Christ, or have never heard much about Christ or, for a host of reasons, have not grasped the good news that they are God-loved, God-reconciled, and God-saved. Oh, what a story we have to tell.

But we cannot tell it if we stay inside. No one in Jerusalem was breaking down the door to get with the disciples and, for the most part, no one is breaking down the doors of our churches to get inside. This makes it incumbent on the church to get outside.

We want to, we say. We do want to witness. But what can we do? We do not speak their language. No problem, the Spirit says. I will interpret for you. And with that the Spirit lights a match. For the Holy Spirit has come dressed for action, burning with fire and blowing with a mighty wind. Burning with passion and filled with the Holy Spirit, we need to make our way into the marketplace to tell of the amazing things God is doing. So many, perhaps not knowing it, are nevertheless waiting to hear it. We can make a difference in the lives of many. How big a difference? Listen.

[Reading of Acts 2:37-42]

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” ³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.