

Hot Heads and Wild Words

Acts 2:1-18

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

May 23, 2010, Pentecost

You might think, from the way we talk about God, that God is all about taking the craziness of this world and bringing some order out of it. You might think, from the way we do church, that Christianity is all about getting away from the chaos of life to a place of quietness and rest. In fact, I was taught in seminary that the Genesis account of creation is about God bringing order out of chaos, with the implication that bringing order out of chaos is our job too.

But if you look at Genesis that isn't what happens at all. Everything is quiet at the beginning. Everything is dark and empty. Then God speaks. His voice is the first sound. And God places fire in the midst of darkness—fires here, there, and everywhere: sun, moon, and stars. In the beginning the earth is a dead place. God speaks to a dead place and brings forth life—not one kind of life, but life in its abundance and diversity, its unpredictability, its spontaneity. Then he creates the most unpredictable kind of life of all, human beings—and then the trouble starts.

It seems to me that God is not bringing order out of chaos. He is taking the quiet of nothingness and bringing fire. He is taking the quiet of lifelessness and bringing life. He takes a planet that is orderly because it is inert and injects it with a big dose of chaos.

In the book of Acts we see that God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is not in the business of bringing order and calm. He is in the business of bringing fire and life. He does not take a world that is chaotic and tell it to settle down. He takes a world that is settled into its ruts of tradition and division and self-protection and turns it upside down. He takes the dry bones and whitewashed tombs of well-ordered religion and gives it life in all of its craziness.

Things are orderly enough in the *first* chapter of Acts. Jesus gives a farewell speech and passes the mantle to his disciples. They wait, as commanded, for the Spirit to come. Meanwhile they have a business meeting and deal with the matter that one of their officers has inconveniently betrayed Jesus and killed himself. Enough of that disorderliness! The bylaws call for a lottery to replace him. Done. All is well.

But then in chapter two all heaven breaks loose.

The Jews had been coming to Jerusalem for this festival for centuries. In the Old Testament it is called the Feast of Weeks; in the New Testament it takes the Greek name of Pentecost—fifty days after Passover. They offered a sacrifice of corn cakes to celebrate the harvest, but more meaningfully it had become a celebration of the time God made a covenant with Israel by giving the law through Moses on Mount Sinai. It was a joyful festival, but it was pretty routine. If Passover was like the Fourth of July, Pentecost was more like Constitution Day.

But the covenant given at Sinai in the midst of great drama—fire and storm and fear and trembling—had become a set of rules. Into that rule-driven religion on the first Pentecost after Jesus comes the wildness of the Spirit. The same symbols are there that you find at Sinai—you see fire and storm winds and confusion—because it is the same mighty God who comes to make a covenant with his people. But it is not the God of tradition and rules. It is the original God of Sinai, the mighty God who liberated them from Egypt, the holy God who makes the people afraid. The Spirit that fell on Moses and all the crazy prophets who ever spoke now came upon all those who had followed Jesus. This was the wild and free God, the one the psalmist described in Psalm 50:3 (NIV): “Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages.” *That* is the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is

not a spirit of rules. Paul puts it plainly: the rules kill; the Spirit gives life. That is the struggle as Paul sees it, a struggle between a religion of rules and an experience of the life-giving Spirit.

So in the midst of the orderly celebration of the covenant made by the wild God of Sinai, a covenant which had been tamed into a set of rules, here comes the Spirit, reasserting himself/herself with fire and wind and confusion. Here is God, bringing some chaos into our false sense of order and propriety.

Jews had come to Jerusalem from all the parts of the world where they had spread because of persecution and poverty in Israel. No doubt they had a pretty good idea what to expect when they came to worship.

But God had another idea. The followers of Jesus, perhaps 120 of them, were together in one place, waiting for God knows what. Suddenly, unexpectedly, they heard a sound. The Spirit did not come in quietness, not this time. The Spirit in this story is not a timid little God who will not show up like Tinkerbell until you are very, very quiet. The Spirit comes with a loud noise—something that sounded like the blowing of a violent wind. You know how people say a tornado sounds like a freight train coming? Something like that. That sound filled the whole building where they were. Then they saw fire. The Spirit did not come invisibly, either. Everybody saw it in the form of fire. The fire rested on the heads of each of the believers. It wasn't just one fire coming on the church; it was fire resting on each individual believer. Each one had his or her own fire. And the fire of the Spirit did what it did to the prophets before them—it made them speak a word from God. This time they each began to speak in a foreign language—one they never studied. It was a miracle produced by the Spirit so that everyone could hear about Jesus.

Wouldn't you like to see that? What if the Spirit came like that at Harbor Church? What if we heard the loud roar of God coming through? What if God's fire was actually visible and you could see it sitting on the heads of those who really love Jesus? What would the Trustees do? Would the fire department come? Would you run for the exits?

There have been times in my life when I was accused of being a hothead. God, I wish I *were* a hothead like those in Acts 2. I wish I did have God's fire falling on me rather than the rational, predictable, people-pleasing notions that come out of my own head. Every once in a while I feel that heat; I feel an invasion of God's craziness; I know in that moment that following Jesus is the one thing I must do even if common sense says it will never work. But generally the rules and expectations of standard religion and every day life bring me back to my orderly senses. Every once in a while I wonder if I am not like that prince in C. S. Lewis's book *The Silver Chair*, who is locked in that chair deep underground because he's been told that every night at midnight he has a fit and imagines that he is a prince of another land called Narnia and tries to escape. The truth is that he is under the wicked spell of a witch and it is only at midnight that he remembers who he really is. What he takes to be a fit and tries to protect himself from is really the only moment that he is sane. Isn't it that way when the fire of the Spirit falls on us and everyone says we've become hotheads or fools? Is that moment of craziness not actually the only moment that we are sane and see things as they truly are?

Acts 2 reminds us that Christianity is not about improving morality or religion. Christianity is about being on fire. One of the sayings of Jesus that is not quoted very often is Luke 12:49: "I came to set the earth on fire" (GNB). Think of that! I came to set the earth on fire! John the Baptist had prophesied that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16). He came to make us all hot heads—or perhaps people with hot hearts. The words of the hymn say

*O may my love to Thee
Pure, warm, and changeless, be
A living fire!* (Ray Palmer, "My Faith Looks Up to Thee")

The Holy Spirit gives us the fire of love for Christ, and that is the fire that spreads the gospel. Augustine said in the 4th century that evangelism is "one loving heart setting another on fire."

When the Spirit fell on those first believers in Acts 2, they were on fire and they started talking about Jesus. The Spirit enabled them to speak in the languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem. What was the response of the crowd to the coming of the Spirit? Bewilderment! "What is going on?" How often do people ask about Harbor Church, "What in the world is going on there?" When the Jesus followers start speaking wild words, some people say, "They are drunk!" How often do people say that about us? "They're having too much fun for 10 o'clock in the morning. They must be drinking in there!" I haven't heard it yet! But this chapter ought to teach us something about how people act when the Spirit comes. The Spirit doesn't make them all shut up and sit down out of reverence. The Spirit makes them stand up and praise God. The Spirit brings a little chaos to the well-planned Jewish festival. Can't we learn something from that?

Now in the midst of all this confusion and wonder, Peter stands up. I want you to remember that not too long ago Peter didn't have the courage to tell a young woman around a fire that he even knew Jesus because he was afraid of being arrested. That fact hasn't changed. He will *still* be arrested for saying that he knows Jesus. But this time Peter stands up before a crowd from all over the world, including people who think he's a crazy drunk. And he tells them boldly the truth about Jesus.

Peter explains that what is happening is the fulfillment of prophecy. This Spirit-induced pandemonium means that the last days have begun and as promised God has poured out his Spirit not only on the occasional prophet but on all of his people—male and female, young and old. Then Peter tells the truth about Jesus. He was sent from God. God worked through him. But you religious people put him to death with the help of the pagan government. But that was not the end of the story. God raised Jesus from the dead. Again, it was the fulfillment of prophecy, that the Messiah would be raised from the dead and be seated at God's right hand to rule with him. The one you crucified has been declared by God to be Lord and Messiah.

Then comes what is to me the biggest miracle of all—the religious people, the ones there to observe the tradition of Pentecost and celebrate the giving of the law, are cut to the heart. The Spirit touches their hearts and makes them aware of the sin of rejecting Jesus. Peter's speech didn't do that. It was God's Spirit. The religious people cried out to the hot heads, "What should we do?" If we've killed the Messiah, what in the world can we do to get right with God? Peter answered, "Turn your life around and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." Admit that the one you rejected was the Son of God and not a crazy person or a heretic. Identify yourself with him publicly and commit yourself to live a new. Let go of your orderly life and become part of the messiness of what God is doing in the world. Let go of the old order and join the uncomfortable chaos of the revolution. Step out of the familiar world of the cold and the dark and let the fire of God fall on your head.

When the Spirit touches us, that is still what God says to us. Repent, and immerse yourself in this person Jesus and the change he is bringing to this world. I can't *wait* to see the Spirit fall, to see your hair and your hearts catch fire, one by one, and to hear a wind moving through our life as a church.