

A Violent Wind, Tongues of Fire, and Other Common Occurrences [Deeper Sheet 5.10.09]

Read Acts 2 + Exodus 19v1-19

Acts 2 is a bizarre story. Complete with wind, fire, and unexpected conversation, the events of Acts 2 have invited many interpretations. Some look at it as the birth of the Church. Others take it to be an example of what happens when a group of people start drinking early in the day. Either way, something happened and whatever it was left people bewildered, amazed, and perplexed all at the same time. It left people asking, "What does this mean?" Encounters with the Spirit of God often have that effect, leading to as many questions as they do answers. But Acts 2 is an extension of a much larger story, and when we understand that larger story, the events of Acts 2 begin to make sense.

No event defines God's redemptive purposes in the world like the Exodus: Israel had been an oppressed people, enslaved by Pharaoh, but God rescued them. The rescue began as a final and devastating plague. The Lord passed through the land of Egypt, striking down the firstborn of anyone who hadn't slaughtered a lamb and put its blood on their doorpost. Several days later, the Lord liberated a ragtag multitude of people by bringing them through the parted waters of the Sea and destroying Pharaoh. After wandering in the wilderness for fifty days, the Israelites stumbled to Mt. Sinai, where the Lord revealed himself to the people and gave them the Torah. Exodus 19 tells of God's presence descending on Mt. Sinai in fire with the sound of thunder. In Hebrew, the word for thunder is "*qolot*". It comes from the same root as the word *voice*. There was a voice. There was fire. God was looking for a people, and the Torah was God's instruction on how that people could show the world what his saving love looked like.

Celebrating the Passover and Pentecost were extremely important for Jews. It was a way of remembering and re-enacting what God had done. So of course there are "Jews from every nation under heaven" celebrating Pentecost in Acts 2, recalling how the presence of God had come down with fire and the sound of thunder. Then it happened: there was the sound of a violent wind and they saw tongues of fire descending, and they began declaring the wonders of God in different languages. They didn't stand around as spectators hoping to simply be inspired. Instead, the Spirit of God came upon them and they were empowered to declare the wonders of God. God hasn't given up. God is still looking to empower people—people who effortlessly witness to the saving love of a God who has never given up on humanity.

Despite the ridicule, God's people thrived, and their numbers grew. Egyptian oppression couldn't stop the Israelites from thriving. Roman oppression couldn't stop the early Christians from thriving. Oppression hasn't been able to stop the Church from thriving in places like present-day China either. God's saving love thrives in adversity. It's only when the Church gets too comfortable that the fire of the Church is diminished.

Do you agree with the statement that encounters with the Spirit of God lead to as many questions as they do answers? Why or why not?

In the Scriptures, God regularly tells the Israelites not to forget what they were rescued from. It's as if God knows that if they forget, they'll lose their fire. What has God rescued you from?

Have you ever felt that your faith, once fresh and exciting, has become boring and stale? If so, what factors do you think contributed to that change?

How would you describe the difference between being inspired and empowered?

What do you think it looks like, or when have you seen someone “effortlessly witness to God’s saving love”?

What connection do you see between the things from which God liberates us and our effortlessly witnessing to God’s saving love?