**The Church in the Power of the Spirit**

**Text: Acts 2:2, 4**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Each of us, at one time or another, has endured a bad sermon. I’ve preached a few myself. Especially difficult to sit through is the first sermon of a seminary student. You want to be supportive, so you hang in there and try to listen real carefully. You want to say something encouraging after church. But sometimes those sermons are just bad!

Except maybe for one time, when a rookie preacher helped to change the world. The rookie preacher was Peter, and the day was Pentecost. Yeah: that was Peter’s first sermon. And if we’d read further in the 2nd chapter of Acts, we would’ve learned that 3,000 people were saved that day! Not bad for your first try. And those 3,000 were the core around which the Church grew, spreading the good news of God’s love and baptizing in the name of Jesus to the ends of the earth.

How do you account for this? We have the answer already in Acts 2, verses 2 and 4: “Suddenly…there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and…all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Sometimes the Spirit gets a hold of you, and it just *compels* you to act. It’s almost like it’s not you doing it, but some unseen force doing it *through* you. Like the time when I was home from college for the summer, and I got on a crowded bus headed downtown. There were so many people standing near the front that you could hardly get on. The thing is, there was plenty of room in the back of the bus, and the bus driver was encouraging people to move back, but no one was listening to him. All of a sudden I found myself preaching to the whole bus. I said, “If you all would just move back, there’d be lots of room for everyone.” And they moved! Then I thought to myself, “Ervin, what the heck are you doing? This is the South Side of Chicago. People have gotten killed for doing less!” Sometimes the Spirit gets a hold of you, and you see what it is that you have to do, and you just do it. Maybe it’s something that you’ve never done before, and maybe you don’t have a clue how to do it, but you do it anyway.

I think that’s how it was for Peter that day: he saw the crowd, he heard their confusion, and suddenly he just *knew* that he could bring some clarity to the situation; *and*, he just knew that he *had* to do it! I’m guessing he didn’t even think very much about it. All of a sudden he was on his feet and the words were just flowing through him. This uneducated fisherman was preaching with clarity and wisdom and authority.

And it wasn’t just Peter: *all* of the apostles were speaking that day. And they were somehow speaking in languages that they didn’t even know; the various languages of the very pluralistic mix of people who were gathered there in Jerusalem. And I’m sure they all had the sense that they weren’t doing this; it was that unseen power doing all of this *through* them. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Church serves in the power of the Spirit. Always has. Always will. Who would’ve thought that a bunch of confused, uneducated, grieving fisherman could become the history-changing force that they and their fellow followers of Jesus did, in fact, become. They preached the Word, healed the sick, stood-up to the most powerful empire on the face of the earth, established communities of faith throughout the Mediterranean world; and they loved one another.

The Church serves in the power of the Spirit: 2000 years ago, and throughout history, and today. One is inclined to simply point to some of the big moments of church history: those foundational events of the 1st century, the Reformation, the crusade against slavery; and those certainly are examples of the Holy Spirit working through the people of God with extraordinary power. But not only there. We are seeing the Spirit work right here, right now, in this place. A year ago, when your Search Committee first interviewed me for the job of Interim Pastor, it was a dispirited bunch who gathered in the library to talk with me. At least, that was my impression. Sunday attendance was hovering around 60, you’d just passed a bare-bones budget, you didn’t have the funds to hire a full-time minister, and quite frankly I was asking myself, “Does this church have a future?

Fast forward 12 months, and things look and feel very different. We are 80 people strong on a regular Sunday, we will finish the church year with a substantial surplus, today you will have in your hands a balanced budget for the second year in a row, we plan to launch some new initiatives in ministry in the coming church year, and there is a good spirit about the place.

Of *course* there’s a good spirit about this place; because the Holy Spirit is *in* this place: the Spirit of Life; and the Spirit of Freedom: freedom from the shackles and fears of the past; freedom to move forward into the future, as the Spirit gives us the wisdom and power to do so. When you have that kind of Spirit – that *Holy* Spirit – pulsating through the congregation, you’re likely to try new things; even if you’ve never tried them before; even if you’re not sure how to do them; even when there’s no guarantee of success.

It’s kind of like the time – years ago – when my wife handed me a new project: she wanted to convert part of our front lawn into a garden, and she’d read about a new way to do it. Of course, you know the old way: you rent the rotor-tiller, turn over the grass and the soil, and you get this nice patch of ground for your garden. But this new way: you lay down newspaper on the grass, you completely cover the newspaper with topsoil, you wait 2 weeks while the grass dies and the newspaper bio-degrades, and then…you have this nice patch of ground for your garden. At least, that’s the way it works in *theory*. So, it’s a nice spring Saturday, and I’m out on the front lawn, laying newspapers on top of a perfectly green, nicely cut lawn. And I’m not a happy camper. Partly because, I forgot that I said I’d do it. But, you know, when you’re handed a job that apparently you agreed to but then forgot about, there’s only one right answer: “Yes, dear.” So I’m laying down this newspaper, and it’s taking longer than expected. And I’m thinking, “This is crazy; I’ve got a sermon to write.” Finally I get all the paper down, but now I’ve got to cover it with soil. Don’t have enough bags of soil. Got to drive to the big box store and get some more. Back home, I’m putting down more soil, and I get to thinking, “I wonder if the person who thought this up actually tried it?” I mean, I’ve now committed hours to this, and I’m not at all sure that it’s going to work! I’m thinking, “I’ve never seen a neighbor try this, no one in my family has tried this, where’s the evidence that this works?” Meanwhile, there’s that sermon that isn’t getting done. And the scripture is this: “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?” (Romans 8:24). So here I am, working on this crazy idea, with no evidence that it’s going to work, but acting as if it will; acting as if I have evidence that it will work when, in fact, there is no evidence that can be seen. Hmmm….. “Hope that is seen is not hope.” Maybe hope and faith are acting *as if* things are going to work out, even when there’s no evidence – nothing that can be seen – that guarantees success. And so you just do it. That is often what happens when the Church lives in the power of the Spirit: something beyond yourself gets a hold of yourself, and you forge ahead as if you can already see the good outcome.

By the end of the day, that piece of lawn was completely covered with top soil, and the sermon on hope had all but written itself in my head. And some weeks later, there was a beautiful new garden in front of the house.

There’s no telling what you might try when the Holy Spirit gets a hold of you. There’s no telling what you might *accomplish* when the Spirit gests a hold of you. There’s no telling, for sure, what the outcome will be. But I can tell you this: when you step out in faith, when you act as if things are going to work out, when you take risks for Jesus’ sake, you will find that there is a power at work within you that can do far more abundantly than anything that you might ask or imagine (see Ephesians 3:20).

Just ask Peter. When he began to speak on Pentecost, I don’t think he had a clue what was going to happen. He was like a conductor, standing before an orchestra, that hadn’t rehearsed the piece that they were about to play, hadn’t even played together once. But the Holy Spirit all but compelled Peter to step forward, and raise his arms, and beautiful music was heard that day, and every day, for the next 2000 years. When the Church steps out in faith, in the power of the Spirit, she can dare to trust that whatever happens, it’s going to be amazing. Because, in the final analysis, it is indeed the Spirit working through us; the One in whom all things are possible. Amen.