

“Didn’t See That Coming”

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You didn’t see Pentecost coming, but it is so God.

Acts 2:1-21

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Back from Hawaii

Linda and I have been in Hawaii for the last several weeks, visiting our son and his family. It’s good to be back. I brought some pictures to show you.

Here’s a picture of me coming out of the liquor store. You didn’t see that coming, did you? A pastor has to find his Diet Coke.

What’s your idea of a Hawaii vacation? It’s a tropical paradise, to be sure, but I would conservatively guess Linda and I were in the sun a few hours in 24 days. You didn’t see it coming that we would return as white as we left.



Why? Our main priorities were 5-year-old Arlo and 3-month-old Nova, which was both exhausting and exhilarating. I didn’t see it coming that I’d be playing mummy.

What did I do with my time? I worked on various projects around the house, including helping my son transform four dining room chairs from rattan to coral fabric. You didn’t see it coming that your pastor would discover a new avocation of upholstery.

I also had the chance to do some reading. A new biography of *Timothy Keller* by Collin Hansen might not surprise you on my reading list, but you didn’t see it coming that I also read a book called *Eat Dirt* and the controversial classic *Catcher in the Rye*.

Since both our son and daughter in law are in marine science fields, I read *Oceans for Dummies*. Did you know there's a mass of seaweed in the Atlantic Ocean that's 2 million square miles, that there are more microbes in the ocean than grains of sand on the earth, that a mantis shrimp can strike with the force of .20 caliber rifles, or that the most fearsome pirate in history was a Chinese woman who in the early 19th century commanded 1800 ships and 80,000 men? I didn't see any of that coming.

We returned home Thursday morning on a red eye, and Friday went down to Columbia for our daughter's commencement ceremony yesterday. Talk about an unexpected journey. For reasons different than most people earn a GED, she skipped her senior year of high school to start college and just finished her Ph.D.

So God

Luke uses several words and phrases in chapter 2 to let us know those who experienced what we now call Pentecost didn't see it coming. Wind and fire and tongues came suddenly. Witnesses were bewildered, amazed, and perplexed.

We might think they should have seen it coming. Last week Pastors Kevin and Paul preached on Acts 1. As Kevin said, Jesus is just getting started when he ascends to heaven. Paul added that Jesus has prepared his disciples to be witnesses, but they're not ready yet. Not "until the Holy Spirit comes upon you" (1:8).

Luke's readers should have seen that Pentecost had been foreshadowed from the opening of his gospel. John the Baptist, his mother Elizabeth, and Jesus' mother Mary were all said to be "filled with the Spirit" in Luke 1-2. Luke uses the word "Spirit" more than any other Gospel writer. John the Baptist had said Jesus "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:16). The Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove at his baptism (3:22), led Jesus into the wilderness for his temptation (4:1), and emerged into the public ministry "in the power of the Spirit" (4:14).

Luke's been consciously setting us up for Pentecost, but I still say neither his readers, nor the way he tells the story, or the disciples of Jesus, saw this coming. Whenever God shows up, you always end up saying, "I didn't see that coming." But at the same time, when God shows up, he's always so God. That's how I see Acts 2.

What is this?

The setting is in verse 1: "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place." What happened in Acts 2 so transformed "the day of Pentecost" for Christians that we forget it was already a thing before that day. It was one of three annual festivals that drew Jewish pilgrims to the Jerusalem temple. Also called "Feast of Weeks" because it's seven weeks after Passover, "Pentecost" indicates 50 days.

The Twelve disciples have been joined by 100+ others, men and women, praying and waiting as Jesus said. We don't know where "the one place" was they gathered, because apparently it doesn't matter. What matters is what happened there. They all heard a wind, they all saw fire, and they all spoke in other languages because they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. All of this happened "suddenly." They didn't see it coming.

What they *heard* was wind (2). This is no ordinary wind. First, wind usually blows horizontally. This wind "came from heaven." Second, the wind was what they heard, not what they saw. Close your eyes, imagining that your hair is untouched, the candles are motionless, no papers rustle, but "violent wind" sounds fill this room.

What they *saw* were "dividing tongues of fire" (3). There was apparently one large flame that subdivided 120 ways and rested on each person.

The sound of "filling" and the sight of "tongues" set us up for verse 4. All 120 of them were "filled" (same word) with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other "tongues" (same word). It was the Spirit who gave them this gift of "utterance."

Luke tells us that "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" were in Jerusalem (5). That's a hyperbole, but he wants us to see the multi-lingual, multi-cultural diversity. The NIV says all these people were "staying" in Jerusalem, but the NLT's "living" or ESV's "dwelling" is probably more accurate. They could have been pilgrims present for the Feast of Pentecost, but Jews from the Diaspora regularly came and went.

It's a little hard to tell what happens in verse 6. The disciples had all been gathered "in one place," also described as "the whole house," but now "a crowd came together in bewilderment." Had they been in an accessible or open place when they started speaking in tongues, or did they move out into the streets? Could the Jerusalem temple be the location for either or both? It's unclear.

What's clear is that the diversity of people there not only hear the believers in their own language, but are also aware of their variety of origins, and this makes them "utterly amazed" (7). After all, these are monolingual Galileans, which is like saying, "They're all from Caldwell County (or West Virginia)" in a pejorative, condescending tone. But we all understand them – whether we came from Europe, Asia Minor, the Middle East, or Africa (8-11). I love that "Arabs" are included at the end of the list, because more than likely these were Nabateans whose capital was Petra.

Their question in verse 12, literally translated, is, "What is this (the languages) trying to be?" It's more than "What does this mean?" (NIV). It's more like, "What's going to happen next?" We didn't see this coming. Some of them, either mocking or joking, said, "They're just drunk."

So Peter gets up to “explain” (14) with both volume and urgency. Get used to this, because this is his second moment of leadership post-Easter and he’s going to take center stage for eleven chapters in Acts. But don’t get so used to it that you forget this is the thrice-denying Peter, the worst failure of the Twelve, except for the betrayer, who’s dead by suicide.

He first addresses the “too much wine” comment (15). He might be defensive, but I think he’s using a little humor. He said something like, “We only went to the liquor store to buy Diet Coke!”

Peter then quotes from one of the prophets, Joel. It’s one of those Bible passages, and there are many, that are *so* God. You can’t take the prophecy and accurately predict the event. But once it happens, you’ll say, “I didn’t see that coming, but that’s exactly what God said would happen.”

“In the last days,” Joel says, and those “last days” began at Pentecost and continue until today, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people...sons and daughters...young and old” (16). Remember, it was all 120, men and women, who spoke in tongues and were heard in other languages. The prophecies are accompanied by natural phenomena as well, including “fire and billows” (19). The exact parallel to “wind and fire” doesn’t matter.

Finally, and most importantly, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (21). I want you to notice that the name “Jesus” has not appeared in any of the verses we read today. Everything in these 21 verses, however, prepares us for the preaching about Jesus in verses 22ff. The Spirit’s role is always to point to Jesus. None of this happens without Jesus coming, living, preaching, healing, dying, rising again, and ascending. I don’t want to minimize him at all. But I do want you to see that without the Day of Pentecost, the story of Jesus fades into history’s oblivion.

Filled

You didn’t see Pentecost coming, but it is *so* God. So what have we learned in this introduction to the Holy Spirit? And what does it all mean?

On a literal level, we’ve heard wind, seen fire, and marveled at the miracle of tongues – simultaneous translation into the native language of every person present.

Christians love to debate the details, especially whether these experiences are normal or repeatable. The reason we can debate them is that Luke doesn’t say either way. That’s not his interest. His emphasis is on God showing up through the Spirit.

This is totally unexpected, but it is absolutely essential to the story of the Bible. I would even argue that Acts 2 is the most important passage in the entire Bible for explaining why you and I are here together this morning. That’s a strong statement, and

you might be tempted to ask, “What about the cross and the empty tomb?” I’m not forgetting them, but all four gospels end with the disciples not understanding, not equipped, not empowered to do anything about what they have seen and heard of Jesus – not only on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but for three years. The Gospel doesn’t extend around the world or endure two thousand years without Pentecost.

Wind and fire represent his power, but also the mystery. God can do anything, but he will not be scheduled or manipulated.

But the Holy Spirit is always about people. Connecting people to God and to each other. Whenever you think someone doesn’t belong among Jesus’ people, the Holy Spirit will surprise you with his power and mystery to draw them to Jesus and each other.

Here, the Holy Spirit fills his people. He’s filled people before, but for a specific time and place. This filling is invasive and permanent and inclusive.

Because he fills his people, his people now can wait and strive and hope. These are all evidences of the Spirit’s work.

The Spirit gave me this message again in three distinct ways in a 24-hour period.

On the plane ride home Wednesday night, I finished another book I had been reading on vacation: *Single Gay Christian*, by Gregory Coles. Reading the book both made me encouraged and sad. It just reminded me of how poorly we (meaning the Church, including our church, including me) have handled a generation-long struggle in culture and the church. Gregory says,

People knew me, but it didn’t mean they really *knew* me. And it’s hard to feel loved when you’re convinced that people have only ever loved your effigy, when you’re afraid they might love the real thing less, or not at all.

This is a book about Gregory, filled with the Spirit, learning to wait, strive, and hope. He strives against his impulses, against the church. He waits for answers, waits to come out to family and friends. And ultimately he finds his hope in a pastor, in a church, in people who do know “the real thing.” That’s a work of the Holy Spirit comparable to the inclusion of so many diverse languages and people on the Day of Pentecost.

The next day, I witnessed this filling on my return from Hawaii in a visit to the home of Phil and Tammy Mumford. Their daughter, Cassie, was there with her husband, Josh Lowry. The Mumfords have been part of our church family for almost two decades. I wanted to see him before he passed.

And what a Presence I experienced when I visited them on Thursday. Phil gave his life to Jesus after he experienced Jesus at one of our church retreats in the 2000s. He was surprisingly alert, and spoke several (short) sentences in response.

Every cancer battle is about striving, waiting, and hoping. It's the Holy Spirit who enables this – for the individual, the loved ones, and he most often does it through the same power he demonstrated at Pentecost – the power of mystery, yes, but the power of working in and through people.

What drew Phil to Jesus and what has sustained his faith up to and through his cancer battle has been Spirit-filled believers, the church. The stories Tammy told of one person after another in the Church loving them, being there with them and for them. It was a Pentecost moment. Then, Friday, on our way to Columbia, Pastor Paul texted me: "Phil just passed."

There was one other moment. I had found myself in a funk toward the end of my vacation about the whole pastoral transition thing. Most of the time I've been good with the uncertainty and the delay. Not this past Monday. I was weary, and not ready to come home refreshed. The Holy Spirit has been helping me with striving and waiting, but I lost some perspective for a brief period of time.

On Friday morning I was reading my devotional on the book of Jeremiah, perhaps the most "downer" book in the Bible. The writer said, "Physically turn yourself in a different direction. Use the new view as a stimulus for a period of praise and thankfulness to God for his faithfulness, especially in trying circumstances." I turned around and saw...you. On the piano in our study I saw Jesus and I saw you. I saw the crèche we brought back from Israel, and I saw the wooden model of Corinth some of you gave us last fall. Then I thought about that picture of 45 new members who joined Corinth last Sunday – when their pastor was in Hawaii.

What has you in a funk? Turn around again. It's the people of God who encourage and bless me. And you. It's the Holy Spirit who is at work in life after life in this church family, bringing people to call on the name of the Lord so they are then filled with the Holy Spirit and then, in the power and mystery of that Spirit they draw yet others to him. I needed to remember that the Holy Spirit is still calling, filling, helping us to strive, and wait, and hope.

Amen.