

June 4, 2017  
Acts 2:1-13  
Numbers 11:24-30

## What Could Happen

What could happen if the Spirit came upon us today just like it did at Pentecost? What COULD happen if the Holy Spirit blew in here and anointed us all and set us all on fire and put prophetic poetry in our mouths, and had us spilling out into the world, preaching joy and hope in Jesus Christ; what could HAPPEN?

Maybe you're wondering that today as you hear the scriptures of Pentecost. Maybe you are wondering what could happen when you put together a bunch of Presbyterians and AME folks. Maybe you aren't entirely sure you want things to get all Spirit crazy. Who knows what could happen if the power of God lands on us, and unites us in same urgent belief that God is about to do something big. You don't know what might happen to that white girl in the pulpit. It's a little unsettling to consider what could happen if the Spirit showed up.

But maybe that's just what we need. Maybe we need God's Spirit to show up today. Not just for a spectacle or for entertainment purposes.

But because we need it. The church needs it. And more importantly, the

world needs it. With all the terrible things happening out there; with fear and hatred and violence everywhere. With the news from London and Syria and Manchester and North Korea and Washington DC and Lexington. The injustice and the lack of trust and the lack of compassion. The troubles in our communities, the troubles in our families, the troubles in our own hearts. We need the Spirit to show up, not for our sake today, but for the world's sake. So that we, as the church, can be God's prophets again; so we can proclaim that God is about to do something big; can you imagine, what could happen? It's what the world needs right now. It needs to know that God can do something. That there IS hope. That there is a chance we will make it. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary. In spite of all the bad news, there is good news. The good news that fills these pages. The good news that God is always seeking to deliver us. The good news that goes all the way back to a group of Hebrew people in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and Moses, their spiritual leader. Today, we join these Hebrew people, the people of Israel, as they are wandering in the wilderness. In our story today from the book of Numbers, the Israelites have already escaped

from Egypt. God has delivered them from the terrible slavery of Pharaoh. They have been freed from the bonds of oppression and tyranny. Because God did something big. But even so, even though they are free, things are not fine and dandy. They are not living on easy street. They didn't walk from Egypt straight into a comfortable 4 bedroom, 2 ½ bath life in the suburbs. They are still in the wilderness. And it will take them 40 long years to get to the land that God promised them. And they will walk and walk, and wander and wonder if they are ever going to get there. Will they ever get to the promised land? And when? And how much longer is this going to take? These people, God's people, they are in the wilderness. No longer slaves, but not yet safe at home. They are in the wilderness, stuck between the old life of despair and the new promised life of abundance. They are in the wilderness, just as we are in the wilderness today. Because in Jesus Christ we have been set free. We are no longer bound to the greedy Pharaohs of this world. We are no longer slaves to sin and the devil's lies that this THIS is all there is. By the mercy of Christ, we have been set free. We have been delivered from that life, but we haven't gotten yet to that life eternal with God. We

haven't gotten where we are going yet. We haven't reached the Promised Land yet. We are still in the wilderness, aren't we? The wilderness of doubt and fear and emptiness. We are still pilgrims and nomads, wandering and wondering when we will get there and be safe at home with God.

That's how it is for us. That's how it has always been for God's people. For Moses and the Israelites; they weren't slaves in Egypt any more, but they weren't yet to their Promised Land. They were still in the wilderness with no comforts. With no meat to eat, and none of those delicious delicacies of Egypt; no cucumbers, no melons, no leeks, no garlic. This is what the people of God are complaining about in Numbers chapter 11. They are complaining and they are sick and tired of being in the wilderness. And they have had nothing to eat but manna and more manna. And they are starting to think that maybe they should go back to Egypt. That maybe God isn't all God is cracked up to be. And that they were fools to believe they would get to that Promised Land.

God hears the complaining. God always hears. God is used to it, I think, from us. And God and Moses have a little conversation. And God invites

Moses to bring the seventy elders to the tabernacle tent. And the Spirit of God that is with Moses comes to rest upon those elders. And the elders prophesy. And in the scripture, this spiritual anointing seems like a very formal and delicate event. Because it says in verse 25 that the elders prophesy but it doesn't happen again. But in the meantime, the Spirit has come to rest on two men in the camp. And Eldad and Medad, they are running around prophesying for all they are worth. And they aren't elders. And they aren't authorized or qualified. But there they are, on fire with the Spirit, proclaiming the Word of God to anyone and everyone like crazy.

So Joshua, good old Joshua, steps in and he tells on them. He tells Moses what's going on and says he should stop Eldad and Medad. And I think Joshua must have been a bit of a Presbyterian. He must have liked things done decently and in order. And I wonder how often the church is like that. How often we treat the Spirit like a delicate, formal matter. And we don't things to get out of control. We don't want people to be too joyful or hopeful. Because what could happen? What would the world think of us, prophesying in this wilderness about the promises of

God? They would say we are crazy for having hope for this hopeless world. We are crazy for believing that there is a God who delivers people from powerful Pharaohs. There is a God who splits Red Seas in half and makes a way where there is no way. For believing there is more to life. And more to come. And that this wilderness isn't all there is. That God has a place for us to call home. And we are almost there. We are almost there. If we say those kind of things, people might think we are crazy or drunk.

But Moses does not agree. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!," he says to Joshua. If only this is what all of God's people could do. But we are used to keeping God small and manageable. We keep God small and digestible. We keep God small and programmable. We know what COULD happen with God. We know what could HAPPEN with the Spirit. That's what scares us.

But it's what the world needs right now. It's what we need. It's what the church needs. Just as Jesus' disciples needed it at Pentecost. As they were wondering and wandering and worrying about what was next. And that things looked pretty grim for them. That they might have to give up

on this whole Jesus thing. Because Jesus had left them. He had ascended into heaven and he had left them to fend for themselves. Yes, Jesus had overcome the powerful of Rome and Judea. Yes, he had delivered them from sin and fear. Yes, he had brought them through death into resurrection and a new life. But now, now they were in the wilderness. That in-between, not-yet place. And there was a long way to go to the Promised Land. And how would they get there without Jesus? And what chance did they really have?

The disciples needed the Spirit. They needed that powerful breath of fresh air, that joyful fire burning in their hearts. That unstoppable hope pushing them out into the world; with the crazy idea that God is not yet finished with the world. That God is about to do something big. That there IS good news for everyone. And the people who saw them and heard their words thought they were crazy and drunk. Because they were running around saying that there was something to believe in. There was grace yet to come. That there was reason to hope. How long has it been since the world thought the church was crazy? How long has it been

since the world thought we were off our rockers because we believed we had good news?

We need that Spirit. The world needs that Spirit of crazy hope. And just how much of the world needs it, is indicated in the list of nations Luke gives us. It's the nations and the names that everyone prays they won't have to read out loud in church. Scholars agree they can't agree on what it means, whether this is a list from a zodiac map.<sup>1</sup> Or if it's just a list of all the peoples from far and wide. The point is, is that God's Spirit is needed everywhere. We don't get the Spirit to keep the Spirit. The church doesn't get to be a church that stays in a little room in Jerusalem, complaining about the state of the world. Because the world needs hope. It needs joy. And whether we want it or not, the Spirit is going to take the church and make the church out there among the people, away from the tabernacle tent, away from the place it's supposed to be to the place it needs to be. Because the world needs to know what COULD happen with God.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Metzger, [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ahg/acts\\_metzger.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ahg/acts_metzger.pdf)

They need to know the good news that there is a power greater than any power in the world. Greater than greed. Greater than fear. Greater than any of the empires or principalities that wish they were God. Greater than what he said or she said or they said. And we know it's hard to believe. We know it's hard to hope. Because we are still in the wilderness. We are still so far from home. But we are going to get there. We just know it. The story isn't over yet. In the end, God will bring us home.

What we have this Pentecost, is a Spirit of hope. A Spirit of joy. A spirit of forgiveness and compassion. Not a Spirit of malice or a Spirit of envy. Or a Spirit of arrogance. God did not give us a Spirit of doubt in the face of hatred or a Spirit of cowardice but a Spirit of power and love and self-discipline.<sup>2</sup> God has given us the Spirit that we need. We have the world's worst case of optimism. Because we know what COULD happen with God in Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7

We know that a manger in a barn can be the cradle of a king. We know that fishermen and tax collectors and women with jars of perfume can be the mouthpieces of God. We know that the last will be first and the least will be the greatest. And that children will be welcome. That the blind will see. The lame will walk. The captives will be set free. We know what could happen with Jesus. We know what he can do with Good Friday. We know what he can do with crosses and graves. We know what he can do with death and the devil who tempts us to despair. We know what Jesus can do with all those things. We know what could happen with our God.

We have a Spirit of hope. We have the world's worst case of optimism. We have what the world needs right now. In this wilderness that we are in, of injustice and prejudice and emptiness and fear; and the doubt we have, and the worry that we have failed to be the people of God. But we know what could happen when a Presbyterian church and an AME church gather on a Sunday morning in June. What could happen? Let that Holy Spirit come. Let it anoint us so we may prophesy. O God, make us your church of hope. Make us your church of grace and mercy.

Make us your church, one church, the church that this world needs.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.