

“Crash Helmets and Comforters!”

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Scripture

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.'"

Sermon

This morning begins the church season called Pentecost.

It happens to be the longest of the church seasons
(stretching from now until Advent).

It celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to energize God's people,
unleashing a chaos of flaming tongues flying through the air,

But Pentecost must also become a present and daily reality
so that we too may find a similar energy and courage
as those who first experienced it.

The Spirit's coming should be at least a little bit unnerving,
if not downright scary due to the uncontrollable
and unfathomable nature of that Divine being!

The Spirit can also be experienced in a variety of ways.

The most familiar analogies often used are forces found in nature
such as fire, water, air, tectonic shifts and celestial events.

And the Spirit's arrival can cover the entire spectrum of sight and sound,
from an ear-shattering cacophony to an imperceptibly soft whisper -
from frightening chaos to the most gentle sense of peace.

But however we experience the Holy Spirit
we also must be sure that it is truly the Holy Spirit.

There are several criteria according to scripture.

Does it lead to the gifts of the Spirit which Gal. 5:22 lists as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

A second test is -- Does this experience urge the passions that we have to continue God's creative work in the world?

Thirdly, does it help to unify all people who seek to become a part of the family of God's people?

And lastly, does it indiscriminately fall upon everyone, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, social location, and race?

We should also never forget that on the Spirit's initial voyage here in Acts, the Spirit's first act was to spread multilingualism and with it, increased multicultural understanding.
And boy don't we need some more of that now?!

Various translations use many names for the Holy Spirit.
The most common names include:
Advocate, Comforter, Helper, Counselor, Companion and Friend.

Each of these carries its own special nuance because no single name alone is sufficient.

One of the names, Comforter, has a very personal meaning for me.

My first Bible was the venerable King James Version.
And in today's passage it uses the name, Comforter.

Now, growing up in a drafty old farm house, on the plains of Kansas, I knew what a comforter was.

In fact, for several months of the year, I guess you could say, my life depended upon not one comforter, but a whole stack of them.

You see, my older brother and sister and I slept up stairs and the entire upstairs, all three bedrooms, had only one aging gas heater that never seemed quite able to heat the entire space.

Some of my earliest and, may I say, most comforting recollections of childhood, were of cold winter nights where I ended up buried under layers of lovingly hand stitched quilts, usually to the point that I could barely move under their weight.

And no matter how cold it was outside, within minutes I was, as my folks had promised, "snug as a bug in a rug!"

Now that old north wind could howl in the winter
as it swept over the wide open Kansas prairie,

but I would fall asleep, listening to the howling outside,
feeling safe and warm under a pile of comforters.

Another powerful and I guess contrasting image
comes from the quote by Annie Dillard printed in the bulletin.

“Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry set mixing up a batch of TNT... It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats or velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews!”

This quote actually seems more in line with the account
of the first Pentecost that we read earlier from the book of Acts!

Imagine the flames leaping about the room
and everyone shouting all at once and yet not
being able to understand a word of it?

I don’t know about you, but I would be more inclined to stop,
Drop, and crawl towards the nearest illuminated “EXIT” sign!

But fortunately for me, I always have my safety helmet with me
and I brought it with me this morning just in case!

I would also suggest you all put on your helmets now
(if you haven’t already?) or get under your quilt as I finish.

For as the actress, May West used to say,
“Hold on tight fellas it could get a little bumpy!”

The bumpiness or discomfort comes
in the form of a few troubling questions:

What is it that keeps us from harnessing all of that power
that the Spirit is offering us?

Could it be that we fail to experience the Holy Spirit’s presence
because we simply do not ask?”

Are we just too scared? Or perhaps we’re just ignorant?
Or maybe we’re too distracted or perhaps just a little lazy?

So ask yourself, “Do you really want it?”
After all you gotta want it. And if you’re seriously gonna ask for it,
you better get ready and get that helmet strapped on tightly!

No doubt those folks we read about in Acts this morning
were at least a bit unnerved and most likely a bit scared too!

They had no idea what was going on,
let alone what was likely to happen next!

They were filled with uncertainty and no doubt much despair -
for you see Jesus had just left them by ascending into heaven.

And Peter's little speech wasn't probably a whole lot of help either -
all that talk about visions and dreams promising more fire,
as well as smoke, blood red moons, and stars falling from the sky!

I'm feeling a little vulnerable just reading it!
Not only do I feel the need for a little protective gear
but maybe a nice heavy blankey might help as well.

But the journey of Pentecost will likely require both crash helmets AND comforters!

It's a trip man, a thoroughly thrilling journey.
Thrilling as in a combo of excitement, danger, and high adrenaline!

But the Spirit also comes to us, not just me alone or you alone.
We do not have to travel alone, for the Spirit comes to inspire,

excite and empower what at first seems like
the most unlikely group of traveling companions.

But none the less folks, we need traveling partners not exactly like us,
we need a diverse group of folks who can help each other out
when the journey gets difficult or seemingly too long.

And as the old African proverb informs us, this may not be the fastest
way to travel, but it will be what takes us the farthest
and I would add, a lot more fun and totally worth the while!