

# “Crash Helmets and Comforters”

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By Steve Ramer, Pastor

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## Scripture

Acts 1:1-21

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

We are currently in the church season of Pentecost, which actually began back in mid-May.

It is the longest of the church seasons and it celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to energize God's people.

Unleashed in the chaos of flaming tongues flying through the air, Pentecost is also a present and daily reality that we too must live into.

And similar to those who first experienced it,  
we too ought to find it at least a little bit unnerving,  
if not down-right scary due to the uncertainty and unfathomability  
surrounding this wildcard in the Trinity called the Holy Spirit!

Now Mennonites, historically do not talk much about the Holy Spirit.  
I don't know if it is because we're too unnerved  
by such unpredictability or if maybe we're just too insecure?

Maybe it's because we are so focused on the more concrete forms  
of spirituality like what we call discipleship?  
Maybe we confuse faithfulness with doing rather than experiencing?

But scripture is full of references to the ways in which the Spirit  
can move and work in the lives of God's people.

The Spirit is experienced in a variety of ways.  
The most familiar analogies 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  
from an ear-shattering cacophony to an imperceptibly soft whisper -  
from frightening chaos to the most gentle sense of peace.

The Spirit can come as lightening cracking, thunder rolling,  
earthquakes shifting mountains, hurricanes, floods,  
and a raging forest fire that sweeps away everything in its path!

But the Spirit of God can also come to us like gurgling  
fountains of refreshing spring water that pour forth  
becoming streams that quench thirsty deserts.

Or the Spirit can come like a gentle rain, or a "still small voice,"  
a gentle summer breeze, or the cool of the morning.  
Perhaps the Spirit is the "burning in our hearts"  
as we travel life's road with Jesus at our side?

The Spirit can come as that calming touch  
or the warmth of a campfire shared with a friend.  
Or maybe it is the sudden courage that wells up inside us,  
prodding us to forgive when we've been hurt,  
or to even seek forgiveness when we have offended?

Maybe a Pentecost moment is that sudden inspiration

to reach out to someone in need  
or even our response from those long-held convictions  
that prompt us to stand up against greed, hate and violence.

Maybe we experience the Spirit's fire when we hear a strange language  
or maybe it is especially present when we try to learn the other's  
language and to embrace those who seem strange to us?

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, is it indiscriminate -- falling upon everyone,  
regardless of age, gender, sexuality, social location and race?

But as I pointed out earlier, we do not celebrate a mere historical event  
but an ongoing, daily Pentecost, of the Spirit of God with us 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 just one comforter but a whole stack of them.  
You see, my older brother and sister and I slept upstairs,  
and the entire upstairs, all three bedrooms, had only one

aging gas heater that could barely heat that 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.

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  
while 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.  
A colleague of mine shared it a few years ago in her sermon  
given at MSMC Annual meeting:

*“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 once said:  
*“folks the trip 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 ourselves  
into all of that power 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 "sceert?" 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 seriously gonna ask for it,  
yYou'd 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 'bout 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 blanky might help as well.

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

For you see, it is a trip where I know I cannot make it on my own.  
It is, I'm convinced, at times, both a thoroughly thrilling  
and yet an utterly frightening journey.

However, I do not have to travel it alone, for there is an entire community of folks who are my necessary traveling companions. Necessary cause I'll need some help sometimes, help with getting strapped in or help with just holding on.

And at other times it will be the challenge, the love and the comfort of those fellow travelers who not only make the journey a bit easier but totally worth the while!

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