

**“Acts of the Holy Spirit:  
RECEIVING POWER”**

**Acts 2:1-12**

*God gives us the Holy Spirit to make us  
all that we can be.*

A sermon preached by  
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Several years ago, *Newsweek* magazine had a feature in which they asked famous personalities to name their five most important books. One of the contributors was author and radio personality Garrison Keillor. Some readers were probably surprised to find that he ranked the Book of Acts at the top of his list. I agree; Acts is one of my most important books as well. It tells such an exciting story and one that is crucial for understanding the church today. When describing the Book of Acts, Keillor offered this concise but potent summary: "The flames lit on their little heads and bravely and dangerously they went onward."<sup>1</sup>

Life is a journey, and we are called to go bravely and dangerously onward. Today is Pentecost Sunday; it's a day of power. I want to talk to you today about the power to move forward on life's journey—as individuals, as families, as a community of faith. The kind of power I'm talking about is not a self-important, self-promoting, self-serving kind of power, but rather an intrinsic, essential kind of power that lies at the center of our life and faith. I'm talking about spiritual power, the power of the Holy Spirit, the power that exploded on that first day of Pentecost, and the power that can live in you today.

Wouldn't you like to live with that kind of power? William James, one of the pioneers in the science of psychology, once said, "No human being ever learns to live until he has awakened to the dormant powers within him." Awakening the power of the Holy Spirit within us is key to living abundant life. I believe this is the kind of life God wants us to have—a life lived in the abundant power of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit power is the **POWER OF ADOPTION**. When we repent of our sins and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we enter into a personal relationship with God. We are adopted into God's family. The Holy Spirit alive in us is the sign that we are children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Paul talks about this power of adoption in the Letter to the Romans: "*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ...you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs with God and joint heirs with Christ.*"<sup>2</sup>

God is our Father; Christ is our brother; the Holy Spirit is the bond of love in the family. The Holy Spirit is within us—in the experience of prayer, in the feeling of God’s presence, in the guidance of our thoughts, in the conviction of conscience. This is the sign of our adoption. We are members of the family of God, and that family is illustrated in the church.

Adoption happens in church all the time. One of my ministry mentors is Dr. Norman Neaves, founding pastor of Church of the Servant in Oklahoma City. Norman was doing a baptism one time for a young single mother named Stephanie. There was no father in the picture, but Stephanie wanted to have her baby baptized. She had no family in the city; she was all alone. As she came up before the church, Norman could sense her nervousness, so he asked if anyone would like to stand with Stephanie and serve as sponsor for this new mother and child in the church.

Immediately a retired Air Force colonel and his wife stood up from the front of the congregation. They walked up and put their arms around Stephanie. When the baptism was done, the colonel took the baby and strolled around the sanctuary, showing everyone their new brother in Christ.

But that was not the end of the story. The colonel and his wife took Stephanie under their wing and really became her sponsors, her friends, her family within the church family.

Six years later, Norman Neaves did another ceremony for Stephanie. This time she walked down the aisle to stand beside a young man who was to become her husband. And who walked her down the aisle? The retired colonel. His wife sat in the place reserved for the mother of the bride. For Stephanie, her church family was her family. She had discovered what it meant to be a part of a loving, supportive community. She had found the power of adoption.

Holy Spirit power is also the **POWER OF ADVOCACY**. Even though the Spirit sometimes instructs us through the pain of guilt and repentance, God is always on our side. The Holy Spirit is the gift of God’s presence, so we know we are never on our own, never alone again. Jesus announced this gift the night before he was crucified, when he said, *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.*

*This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you.*”<sup>3</sup> This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the church.

The Greek word translated “Advocate” is *parakletos*. It can mean several things. It is a term used for the one who argues on behalf of someone in a court of law, like an attorney. It can be translated as “Counselor,” because the Holy Spirit guides our thoughts in God’s direction. The word can also mean “Comforter,” because that’s what the Holy Spirit does when we are lost and alone and troubled. When the trials of life threaten to overwhelm us, we know that we have an Advocate. We are not on our own. We have a strength that comes from the Spirit.

Another use of the word *parakletos* comes from the battle field. When Greek soldiers went into battle, they always fought in pairs. When the enemy attacked, they would stand back-to-back, covering each other’s blind side. Your battle partner was called your *parakletos*.<sup>4</sup> In the battles of life, when the Enemy attacks, the Holy Spirit has our backs. That’s the power of Advocacy.

Because we have an Advocate with the Father, we can also be an advocate with God’s children. We can stand up for the distressed, the oppressed, the dispossessed, and fight for justice, equity and fairness for all. We have power to confront the evil in the world, because the Holy Spirit is behind us.

The third power of the Holy Spirit is the **POWER OF THE GOSPEL**. The day of Pentecost was an exciting time. There was electricity in the air. The rushing wind, the tongues of fire, the unlearned languages—it was clear that God was doing a new thing in the world. But the power of that day was more than just the drama of the external manifestations of the Spirit. It was about the message that God was giving to the world. This was the way God was communicating the Good News of Jesus. The excitement drew the crowd, then Peter got up and preached the very first Christian sermon.

We see in that sermon and the other speeches of Peter in Acts the essential elements of the apostolic proclamation. Scholars

have defined six statements that characterize that early Christian preaching. This is the core of the Gospel:

1. The Age of Fulfillment has dawned, the "latter days" foretold by the prophets.
2. This has taken place through the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
3. By virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God as the Messiah, the head of the new Israel.
4. The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory.
5. The Messianic Age will reach its consummation in the return of Christ.
6. An appeal is made for repentance with the offer of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation.<sup>5</sup>

The Holy Spirit came to 120 believers on the Day of Pentecost. When Peter shared the Gospel with the people of Jerusalem, 3,000 were baptized that day. A few days later, Peter and John were preaching in the Temple, and 5,000 responded. Soon Christianity was a movement, and Acts says the apostles were turning the world upside down.<sup>6</sup> That's the power of the Gospel.

The Gospel still has transforming power. It's the same old story that Christians have been telling for 2,000 years. But it's still the story that brings us life. As the old gospel hymn says, "I love to tell the story, twill be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old, story of Jesus and his love."<sup>7</sup> I love the story because it brings peace to our anxiety, strength to our weakness, joy to our sadness, grace to our failures, forgiveness to our sins, and resurrection to our dying day. It's a story of amazing grace; because of this gospel, we once were lost, but now we're found. We were blind, but now we see. That's the Good News in a nutshell. Once you were that; now you are this. The power of the Gospel is the power of transformation. It's the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is what God brings to us on Pentecost: the power of adoption, the power of advocacy, the power of the Gospel. God gives us the Holy Spirit to make us all that we can be. Our response to this gift is to *become* all that we can be through the

Holy Spirit. We respond to God under our own power. This is the **POWER OF FAITH**.

The power of faith is our response to the Good News of Jesus. We believe. We trust. The Holy Spirit has prepared our hearts so we can receive what God has given us. When we personally and intentionally surrender to God, then we are filled with the Spirit. When the people on the day of Pentecost asked how they should respond to Peter's sermon, he told them to "*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*"<sup>8</sup> And they did—3,000 of them!

Faith is a process, not an event. It's an action word. Faith involves a personal relationship with God, but if you know anything about personal relationships, you know that they take work. Our relationship with God is no different. God gives us the Holy Spirit, then we work with the Holy Spirit to become the person God wants us to be. It takes discipline. It takes obedience. It takes surrender and sacrifice. But it is a process that is powered by the Holy Spirit. And it results in a transformation of our lives into the beautiful creation that God intends us to be.

Several years ago a woman named Ruby wrote a devotional for *The Upper Room* magazine. She was watching her niece work at the potter's wheel, shaping a beautiful bowl from a lump of clay. Ruby shared with her niece that she had a dream just the night before in which she had formed a lovely vase from a lump of clay. Immediately, her niece put a wet wad of clay in Ruby's hands and said, "Here, make what you saw in your dream."

God has given us a dream of human life—life abundant and eternal. It is described in the pages of Holy Scripture. What we make out of our lives is in our hands, as we respond in faith and obedience. Working with our hands are the hands of a greater Potter. He is molding and guiding and shaping our lives into his image through the power of adoption, the power of advocacy, and the power of the Gospel. This is the power of Pentecost, the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the power to become all that we can be, and it is a gift from God.

Are you ready to receive that gift today? Are you tired of the struggles and burdens and conflicts of life? Or are you just tired? Do you need a fresh wind blowing through your life, a little fire in your heart, a new word that you have never heard before? Do you want a little Pentecost gift today?

Pastor Bob Younts was given a gift one Sunday. A little boy, about six years old, gave Pastor Bob a little handmade miniature kite. To show his appreciation, Bob began to pull it through the air by its string. Quickly the boy tried to explain to the poor confused preacher, "Pastor Bob, it takes wind to make it fly!"

Our life is a kite that cannot soar on its own. There are too many storms, too many mountains, too many kite-eating trees for us to fly by ourselves. In reality, there are too many disappointments and difficulties, too many tensions and tragedies. But the wind of the Spirit will propel us with power and purpose, as we go bravely and dangerously onward.

Bob Younts said, "A six-year-old boy reminded me that a kite will not be what it is meant to be without wind. Pentecost teaches us that we will not be who we are meant to be without the wind of the Holy Spirit."

You know, the other version of the gift of the Holy Spirit is a lot less dramatic than Pentecost. In John 20, on the afternoon after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples. He greeted them, and they saw the wounds of his crucifixion. Then he simply breathed on them and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*"<sup>9</sup> And they did.

Today, as we celebrate Pentecost Sunday, I doubt a supernatural wind will blow through the room or tongues of fire will dance on our heads or that we will speak in languages we haven't learned. But that doesn't mean the Spirit cannot come. On this Pentecost Sunday, I pray you will feel the breath of Jesus on you. Feel the gentle touch of the Savior. And receive the power of adoption. Receive the power of advocacy. Hear again the powerful good news of the gospel of Jesus. And respond with the power of faith.

That is what it means to receive the Holy Spirit. It means your life will really take off, like a kite in the wind! It means you can become all that God ever intended you to be!

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<sup>1</sup> Garrison Keillor, "My Five Most Important Books," in the "Life in Books" section of *Newsweek* magazine, December 24, 2007, p. 17

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:14-17.

<sup>3</sup> John 14:16-17.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Dalbey, *Healing the Masculine Soul, Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 2.*

<sup>5</sup> This "apostolic Kerygma" was proposed by C. H. Dodd in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. "Kerygma," *Wikipedia.com*.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 17:6.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Hankey, "I Love To Tell The Story," *United Methodist Hymnal*, #156.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:38.

<sup>9</sup> John 20:22.