

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Acts 2:1-21

### When Courage Meets Encouragement

To hear the story from the book of Acts one might think that the Holy Spirit came into the room where the disciples were gathered and overwhelmed them. You might think that the disciples came to themselves later, almost as if they just woke up, and wondered what had happened, what they had said, wondered what language they were speaking, maybe even found themselves somewhere and didn't remember how they got there. You could almost take the story as if it were telling us that the Holy Spirit took control of their bodies, even their minds, and did what the Holy Spirit wanted to do without even caring what the disciples wanted to do. You could think that when you read this story, but you'd be wrong.

As Paul says in First Corinthians (14:32) “the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet.” At no time does the Holy Spirit take control of us, at least not more than we give our consent for it to happen. The consequences of that fact are twofold: firstly, we must invite the Holy Spirit to come into our lives—we must ask for it and wait for it, and secondly, we must be willing to work with the Holy Spirit. It won't do all the work for us. We must be willing to go where it leads us, do what it calls us to do, speak the words it gives us to speak, and be willing to live with the consequences of having done so.

The disciples were still in Jerusalem. It had been fifty days since that crazy morning when they discovered the empty tomb and wondered about its significance. Over the next forty days, Jesus would appear to them at different times, in different places. He would speak to them, share meals with them, invite them to touch his wounds. Finally he led them outside of Jerusalem and was lifted up into heaven before their very eyes. After that, I don't think they

quite knew what to do. Jesus had told them that he would not leave them comfortless, that he would send them an advocate who would continue to teach them and help them. But they couldn't have known what to expect. How would this advocate arrive? What would he look like? How would they recognize him? What were they supposed to do in the mean time? They must have been confused, not to mention frightened. Jerusalem was still a dangerous place to be for the followers of a man who was executed as a criminal and radical. Not knowing what to do, they waited. They waited. They waited because they trusted Jesus and believed that he would send the Spirit as he had promised. They waited because the path was not clear without the Spirit's guidance. It must have been difficult to wait. It would have been easier to do something, anything, even if it was the wrong thing. Doing something would have made them feel like they weren't doing nothing. In fact, they weren't doing nothing... They were waiting, and that's something. During this time, they were, "constantly devoting themselves to prayer." So they were waiting expectantly, praying for the fulfillment of the promise, anticipating the day when the Spirit would come.

The day it came, it came with great power. Suddenly the disciples were energized. Suddenly they knew what they were to do. They were inspired, encouraged, and enlivened. They went out into the streets to proclaim the Good News with power and authority. They were empowered to speak the language of each person who heard them, people from all over the world. The Spirit gave them that ability, but they still used all the gifts that God had given them before, their innate talents, their educations, their experiences, their personalities. In other words, what happened was a partnership between God and the disciples. Together they and the Holy Spirit were able to proclaim the Gospel in a way that people could understand. And it changed lives.

We sometimes make a distinction between Bible times and today. We seem to believe that things happened in those days—amazing things, miracles, healings—but in our time it's just different, like God is somehow different now as compared to then. The truth is that we might not tell the stories the same way they did in those days, but God is still working in the world, doing amazing things. The Holy Spirit is still moving among us, inspiring people to do things they couldn't have imagined possible on their own. We just need to figure out how to tell the stories in ways that are meaningful and understandable to the world today. If we ask for it, if we look for it and listen for it, if we wait for it, the Holy Spirit will teach us how to do that, but we need to remember that the Spirit will not do it for us. It still takes our courage and our commitment to make it happen. It's a partnership.

Last week I heard a story on the radio about a man who, along with his wife, had adopted a girl, the daughter of an alcoholic in the neighborhood where they lived. He raised the girl as his own. With love and support, the little girl, who had been shy and backward, flourished. As an adult, she was a good person who worked with children herself. Then one day she was murdered by a man who robbed her house to pay for his drug habit. The father was angry. He wanted the murderer to die. When they caught him a short time after the murder, he confessed to everything. That's when the man came to himself. He had long opposed the death penalty. He and his wife asked the prosecutor not to seek the execution of the man who killed their daughter. At his sentencing hearing, they were allowed to speak about how the crime had affected their lives. At the end of his prepared statement, the man turned to look at the killer and he told him that he did not hate him, that he hated what he had done, but that he hoped everyone affected by this crime, including the killer, would find God's peace. When he looked into the tear-filled eyes of the killer, he said that it was like looking at a soul in hell.

That night the man couldn't sleep. Finally he got up and began to write a letter to the killer. In the letter, he told him that he forgave him. It was not an easy thing for him to do, and it was not done lightly. When you hear him tell the story, it is almost as if he just realized that he had forgiven the killer, rather than making the decision to do so. After a few weeks, the killer wrote him back. They began a correspondence. They shared with each other about their lives. The man who killed his daughter was born in a psychiatric hospital because his mother was schizophrenic. When he was 11 he watched his mother drown his little sister, because she said God told her to. None of this, in the father's mind, excused him from the guilt of killing his daughter. The two men, however, developed a relationship by mail. You might even say that it became a friendship. The man tells how he would look at Christmas packages that he had packed up to send to the man serving a life sentence for killing his daughter, and he would wonder what was wrong with him. "People don't do this," he said. But he did.

After years of regular correspondence, the man asked the killer what had happened that night. He wanted to know about his daughter's last moments. He wanted to know why he had killed her. He didn't want all the details, but he wanted to hear the story. The young man obliged the old man. He told the story of his daughter's death. In the radio program, the man reads aloud the letter that details the timeline leading up to the awful moment of her death. You can tell how difficult it is for him to do so. Somehow, knowing what happened and having some insight into why it happened (though there is no real explanation, not one that would satisfy anyone, not even the killer himself)... somehow, though, it makes it a little easier for this bereaved father. Somehow it makes it a little easier for the murderer too. It was a story that he had never told anyone before, except the police, no one in his family, no one. It was bottled up inside him. Telling it lifted a burden from him. Hearing it lifted a burden for the man too. He

learned that his daughter was good and generous even to her dying breath, and that she was brave, so brave.

The two men still exchange letters, for more than ten years now.

The Holy Spirit still moves in this world.

I share this story because it is a story about a miraculous thing, a story about a healing... two healings really. I share this story because it speaks in a language that anyone can understand, its message one of love, and grace, and the power of God, and the peace of God. In this story the man is led by the Spirit, but he certainly does not need to go where he is led. I am awed that anyone would have the courage to do what he did. That's the point. It takes courage. The kingdom of God can break in when our courage meets the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. That's when miracles happen. That's when we are capable of things beyond ourselves.

To fulfill our mission of proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ, we must learn how to speak the universal language of love, the *lingua franca* of the kingdom of God. We must re-interpret God's love, and grace, and forgiveness to a world that is aching for it. But we are not alone. The Spirit of God still moves. We must first invite that Spirit into our lives, and willfully give ourselves to its power, waiting upon it with faith and patience. Then we must courageously follow where it leads.

Amen.