

Rendezvous with a Ghost

Acts 2:1-21, 41-42; 20:7-12

Text:

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost . . .

Acts 2:4

Introduction

Whenever one thinks about encountering a ghost, one thing seems certain: that person must be prepared to meet the unexpected. Whether it's coming face to face with the Headless Horseman or La Llorona or the Phantom Drummer or the Ghost of Pearl White or Blackbeard's Ghost or Black Bartelmy's Ghost or the Black Dog of Hanging Hill or the Ghosts on the Ghost Ship of Sandovate, our anticipation must always be the same: when we rendezvous with a ghost, we must expect to be overwhelmed by the unexpected. In this respect, a rendezvous with the **Holy** Ghost is no different. Expect the unexpected.

Our ghost story this morning occurs in Jerusalem fifty days after Jesus had been raised from the dead and ten days after he ascended into heaven. All of the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem when the unexpected suddenly sprang upon them: the Ghost—unexpected—came upon the disciples in the sound of a violent wind from heaven, rushing, swirling within the house in Jerusalem where they were gathered. Tongues, as of fire—unexpected—settled upon the disciples, each of whom was overcome, animated, talking in a variety of languages; emboldened, impassioned, communicating in an assortment of tongues; invigorated, vivacious, relating to a multiplicity of cultures. All of them—unexpectedly possessed by the Holy Ghost—felt the Spirit moving in their hearts, and they prayed. They felt the Spirit moving in their souls, and they spoke. They saw the Spirit coming upon them, dancing—as it were—like tongues of fire upon their heads.

So pronounced was the sound of the violent wind from heaven that people from all over the city crowded into this house inhabited by the disciples. So possessed were the disciples in this rendezvous with the Holy Ghost that those devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem watched bewildered. This composite of internationals, who themselves spoke every conceivable language in this cosmopolitan city, looked on in amazement, wondering that these disciples were speaking to them in their own languages.

This Rendezvous a Revolution

Actually this event had been foretold by Jesus even before his death and resurrection. In his farewell discourse to his disciples—recorded in John 14, he had not only assured them that he was going to prepare a place for them, so that where he is they might be also, but he also promised them as well that he would not leave them comfortless, that he would come to them in the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father would send in Jesus' name.ⁱ On that specific occasion—during his farewell discourse—Jesus had set up a future rendezvous for his disciples with the Ghost, the Holy Ghost, and here and now—in Jerusalem after the Resurrection—that rendezvous is taking place.

But look at this cataclysmic event carefully: a mighty wind from heaven, tongues of fire dancing upon each of the disciples, and all the disciples speaking in foreign tongues so that all the foreigners in Jerusalem could understand. This is more than a surprising or promised rendezvous—more than a citadel of unexpected phenomena—it is an historic revolution. *These men have turned the world upside down* is the accusation leveled against the disciples later in the Book of Acts. There's no *evolution* here; rather, there is *revolution* here, for God gives birth to the Church instantaneously. Here at Pentecost the Church of Jesus Christ is being born before their very eyes, taking shape, finding form, being planted as a catalyst for transformation in a decade of Pharisaic deception and a century of Roman cunning. The disciples' rendezvous with a Ghost is a revolution in the immediate making.

Scoffing at the Revolution

Among the perplexed observers, however, were skeptics. As we know, every cynic has his day, when he chooses to *raise denunciation to the level of a virtue*.ⁱⁱ Here, in this room illuminated by dancing tongues of fire, the cynics' denunciation took on the form of a sneer: these disciples are possessed all right, not by the Holy Spirit, to be sure, but rather by the spirits of new wine. They are undoubtedly drunk: filled with liquor that lathers the brain. Cynics in the house; scoffers in the marketplace!

But we know differently. This is a rendezvous in which the disciples are held firmly in a grand possession, when they are possessed by a divine power, *by the strength and wisdom external to their need and superior to their hunger*, by a divine power *to which the belief and power of their own life could be united*.ⁱⁱⁱ

New wine could not reveal to them their own potential, which the Holy Ghost would use to transform the known world of that time. New wine could not release their own life force, which the Holy Spirit would harness in order to unleash the Spirit's love across the face of the earth. New wine could not empower them to give birth that very day to the Church of Jesus Christ. New wine could not *send them into all the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that Christ had commanded them*.^{iv} Despite the cynics' denunciation, new wine could do nothing for them. They were not filled with new wine; they were filled with the Holy Ghost.

Sleeping through the Revolution

According to our second passage this morning, the Holy Ghost is at work throughout Asia Minor as well, giving birth to the Church under the passionate tutelage of the Apostle Paul. The apostle made his way throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, continually creating an uproar in the Hellenistic world of his day. On the occasion, he has arrived at Troas, a city located on the northwestern coast of Asia Minor and situated on the Aegean Sea. As was Paul's custom, he began to preach. Even though he fully intended to leave the next morning, he preached incessantly on into the evening,

throughout the night, and on to the hour of midnight. Verse 7 states: *he prolonged his speech until midnight.*^v

Then the most astounding event occurred. In the presumably crowded room, Eutychus had taken a place in the open window, no doubt sitting on the windowsill. The Apostle mounted his galloping horse of words and proclamation and sped on and on with untiring diligence towards the resounding climax of the good news of the resurrected Christ. Breathlessly the crowd listened; breathlessly the crowd responded; breathlessly the crowd rejoiced. All except Eutychus, a young man who sank into a deep sleep as Paul verbally galloped on toward the transforming conclusion of his sermon.

We can observe that Eutychus wasn't drowsy because of dim lights. The text tells us that *there were many lights in the upper chamber.*^{vi} There is every indication to assume the candles on the tables were glowing, the torches on the walls were blazing. We can assume as well that Eutychus wasn't drowsy due to boredom since he was too young to be bored. He was but a youth: one youth among the many youth of Troas. Collectively these youth composed the *children of the ideal,*^{vii} belonging to an epoch of infinite hope, versed in Greek systems of logical thought, conversant with the philosophical principles of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, and Epicurus, absorbed by the Greek tragedians Aeschylus and Sophocles. Through and through these youth were a refined product of their Hellenistic context. Everything the Apostle Paul proclaimed throughout the live-long night served as an entirely foreign thought in contrast to standard Greek principles of logic. Every statement Paul issued stood as a radical contradiction in direct opposition to the *a priori* methods of Greek philosophy. Every word out of the Apostle's mouth seared Eutychus' brain as a burning antithesis to a widely-accepted Hellenistic ideology. Everything Paul preached that night was revolutionary.

It is absolutely clear to me that—in the face of Paul's audacious assertions based on empirical divine encounter—Eutychus stopped his ears and shut down completely! If for no other reason than to preserve his carefully learned, logical, systematic constructs of thought, Eutychus closed his eyes, shut down, and fell asleep. He repelled this rendezvous with the Holy Ghost in their midst. Eutychus slept through this revolution of the Church of Christ Jesus: a revolution of radical, preposterous, audacious claims on behalf of a crucified and resurrected Christ.

Some scoffed at the revolutionary rendezvous with the Holy Ghost in Jerusalem; Eutychus slept through the revolutionary rendezvous with the Holy Ghost in Troas. There's a third reaction we need to cite in these passages: and that is that many savored the revolutionary rendezvous with the Holy Ghost.

Savoring the Revolution

At the conclusion of Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Jerusalem, this result is recorded by the author of Acts: *Then they that gladly received Peter's words were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayers.*^{viii} While they had not expected the unexpected, these three thousand souls responded to the power of the Holy Ghost, entered the womb of the wisdom of God, and

passed through the divine cosmic birth canal as the new Church of Jesus Christ. These three thousand souls recognized the experiential genius in this astounding revolution.

And the real stroke of genius is this. If you charged someone with the task of creating a new world, of starting a new era, he would ask you first to clear the ground. He would wait for the old centuries to finish before undertaking to build the new ones, he'd want to begin a new paragraph, a new page.

But here they don't bother with anything like that. This new thing, this marvel of history, this revelation (this ghostly rendezvous, this riveting revolution) is exploded right into the very thick of daily life without the slightest consideration for its course. It doesn't start at the beginning, it starts in the middle, without any schedule, on the first weekday that comes along, while the traffic in the streets is at its height. That's real genius. Only real greatness can be so unconcerned with timing and opportunity.^{ix}

There were those who savored the revolutionary rendezvous with the Holy Ghost, who lived their lives from that moment with zestfulness.

Conclusion

On this Day of Pentecost, we have set before ourselves these three scenarios, simply for the reason that I am certain Bower Hill Community Church—at this very time in its congregational life—is in rendezvous with the Holy Ghost. There are three options before you: you can scoff at the rendezvous, saying to yourself that of course nothing can really come of this; or you can sleep through the rendezvous, saying to yourself that while I appear interested I am totally unconcerned, even indifferent, to all of this; or you can savor the rendezvous and live with zestfulness in the rebirth of this church.

Scoffing at the rendezvous. . .

Sleeping through the rendezvous. . .

Savoring the rendezvous with the Holy Ghost . . .

Which will it be for you?

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come as the wind, and cleanse us;

Come as the fire, and burn within us;

Come as the dew, and refresh us:

Convict, convert, and consecrate us

Until we are wholly thine.

Let all the people say *Amen*. Amen!

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Notes

ⁱ John 14:1-26

ⁱⁱ A line from Albert Camus's essay, *Hungary: Kadar Had His Day of Fear*, from *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, p. 158

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Thomas Wolfe, *The Story of a Novel*

^{iv} See Matthew 28:19-20

^v Acts 20:7

^{vi} Acts 20:8 RSV

^{vii} Phrase from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Modern Library, p. 512; he uses the phrase "the child of the ideal" when describing the Paris *gamin*.

^{viii} Acts 2:41-42

^{ix} Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, Chapter Six: *The Moscow Encampment*, Section 8, p. 195