

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH

ACTS 2:1-4

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Churches are like people. They have birthdays, a moment in time when they came into existence. Unfortunately we do not have an exact date for the birthday of Bedford Presbyterian Church, but we do know that it existed in 1843 and that a decision was made to build the present sanctuary in 1844. This morning, however, let's take a look not at the birthday of a particular church, but the birthday of the Christian Church, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. That event is described in Acts 2:1-4, and it can be summarized by three words: prayer, presence, and power. It took place on the Day of Pentecost, a Jewish holiday celebrating the ingathering of the grain harvest and the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai.

According to the first chapter in the book of Acts the followers were meeting together continuously for prayer prior to that day. There were about 120 people including the apostles and a number of other men and women including Mary the mother of Jesus and His brothers. What were they doing? According to Acts 1:14, they were praying. And what were they praying about? We do not know for certain, but there is one distinct possibility. They were probably praying for the fulfillment of the promises that Jesus had made to them before He ascended into heaven—that they would be filled with the Holy Spirit and that that they would become His witnesses.

If that indeed was the focus of their prayers, then it is a reminder that when we pray within the will and purposes of God, that prayer will be answered. 1 John 5:14 declares, "And we can be confident that He (God) will listen to us whenever we ask Him for anything in line with His will." In other words, Jesus followers prayed and God responded by making his presence known in a most unusual way. A mighty wind filled the room where they were meeting. As on other occasions throughout the Scriptures, God has signaled His presence using one of the forces of nature, wind. That's what took place when God sent an east wind to divide the waters of the Red Sea, and in 2 Samuel 5:24, David told his soldiers, "When you hear a sound like marching feet in the tops of the balsam trees, attack! That will be the signal that the Lord is moving ahead of you to strike down the Philistines." In other words, when David's soldiers heard the sound of a strong wind blowing in the tops of the trees, they would know that God was there and was leading the charge against their enemies.

In the Hebrew language there is a very special word called "ruach." It can have three different meanings. It can refer to a person's breath, the natural phenomenon of wind, and the Spirit of God. Perhaps that's why Jesus said in John 3:8 "Just as you can hear the wind but can't

tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." In other words, the presence of wind can also indicate the presence of God, and that's what took place on the day of Pentecost.

Of course, when God is present, there is always the release of God's power. On the day of Pentecost tongues of fire settled on the followers of Jesus, and the Scriptures state in Acts 2:3 that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. As a result their own tongues were released to speak with an enthusiastic power that had previously been unknown. Previously they had been reluctant, even fearful with regards to telling others about Jesus. Now they boldly began to tell everyone about the wonderful things that God had done in a variety of languages followed by an impromptu sermon that Peter preached to the crowd that had assembled. The disciples were filled with a fire from on high that empowered them to proclaim the good news of God's salvation in Christ. As a result 3,000 people believed that message and were saved.

That's what happens when God's people are filled with His Spirit. They become like boiling water heated by His powerful presence. They are bubbling over with a joyous enthusiasm that cannot be quenched. They are overwhelmed with a profound sense of joy that comes from knowing that God loves them and has actually filled their lives with His presence, and their immediate response is to tell others what they have experienced.

What took place on that day so long ago that gave birth to the Christian Church has occurred on numerous occasions during the past two thousand years. God's people have been empowered by His Spirit to tell others about Jesus and these outpourings of His Spirit have taken place in some unusual ways and in some unusual places. One of them occurred just after World War II on the island of Lewis in northern Scotland. Two elderly women began to pray for revival, and they invited the pastor and the leaders of their church to join with them in that prayer. A revival speaker by the name of Duncan Campbell was invited to preach in their church, and when he arrived the Spirit of God fell upon their congregation with such power that a revival broke out in their church and then all across those northern islands of Scotland. Hundreds of people were saved and the entire region was spiritually renewed.

Today, in America we need a fresh outpouring of God's Spirit upon our country. We are living in a time of great moral and social decay. We need a spiritual rebirth, but that will not take place until we earnestly begin to pray, asking God to make His presence known and to empower us with His Holy Spirit.