

Acts 2:1-13

Outward Church: A History of Fire, Wind, and Smoke

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What would you do if all of a sudden I yelled, “**Fire!**” Would you **stop** and **look around** to see what I was talking about? Would you just **get up** and **run** out of the building? Would you try to locate the **fire-extinguishers**? Or maybe you’d grab a pack of **marshmallows**, **graham crackers**, and **chocolate** for **s’mores**. What would you do if one Sunday you walked into this room and it was **full of fire, wind, and smoke**? Would you think, “ah the **perfect place** to worship the Lord”? Or would you turn around and **run back out**? At the **very first worship service** of the **very first church** something **like this happened**.

Acts 2:2-3 (NIV) 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

There was a “violent wind” and “tongues of fire” (no smoke). Something **wild** is happening, something **uncontrollable**. **God** is **filling** the **room** and the **people**. But if it was **your first day** at that church you might have thought it made **no sense**, but it actually made **perfect sense**. The disciples in that **upper room**, perhaps as many as **120** of them, were **Jewish** and would have **recognized** what was happening as a continuation of the same story the **Hebrew Scriptures** (the **Old Testament**) had been telling. I want to **tell that same story** today to help us **worship better**. To do so we have to go back to the **beginning**.

Genesis 1:1-2 (NIV) 1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

In the beginning **absence, darkness, nothingness, chaos**—all **churning together** like a **stormy** sea; and the **Spirit of God** hovers **like a bird** over the **waters**. The Hebrew word for **Spirit** is **rûah** and can also mean “**wind**” or “**breath**.” The Spirit of God is there **transforming chaos into creation**. God made everything, and it was **good, chaos no more**. But **man** and **woman**, **Adam** and **Eve**, we **reintroduced chaos**. We choose **our own way** instead of God’s way and suddenly everything **fell**. But God has a plan. A long time later he shows up, this time to a man named **Abram**. God promises this man that he’s going to **bless** him and his **descendants** and through him **bless all the nations**.

Genesis 12:2-3

2 “I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
3 I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

God is going to bless Abram, his descendants, and the whole world through them. But he says, “**How** can I know this?” The Lord God answers him by having him **sacrifice animals** by **cutting** them in **half** and laying

them out as a **pathway** to walk through. According to the **culture** of this time Abram might have been thinking, “Oh if I don’t obey God, he’s going to cut me up like these animals.” But God isn’t saying that.

God puts Abram into a **deep sleep** and then **the Spirit of God** comes down and **hovers**, this time as a “**smoking firepot with a blazing torch**” and as those things **God passes through** the split animal pieces. God is saying, may **this be done to me** if I don’t keep my promises to you. The God of the Bible is someone you can **count on**. He’s **trustworthy**. He **doesn’t break his promises** found in Scripture.

The Spirit of God shows up **again**, this time to Abram’s (now **Abraham’s**) **descendants**, the **Israelites**. God shows up as a **burning bush** and tells **Moses** to lead the Israelites out of captivity in Israel (Exod 3). Moses leads them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and to a **mountain** called **Sinai**. There God tells Abraham’s descendants that **if they obey him they will be his priests to all the nations**.

Exodus 19:5-6a (NIV) 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’

The Bible Project’s Exodus video says for Israel to be a “**kingdom of priests...**” “This means they will become **God’s representatives** to the nations and show them **his character** by how they live.”¹ The people agree to **God’s terms—absolute obedience**—and then guess what shows up? A **cloud and fire!**

Exodus 19:16-18 (NIV) 16 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

The cloud is a **theophany**, a **visible manifestation of God’s presence to his people**. The form he chooses to reveal himself is in a **storm cloud and fire**. Fire can be both a **blessing** and a **curse**. It’s a blessing if it keeps **you warm** and **cooks your food**, but it’s a curse if it **burns down your home**. **Likewise**, God is **safe**, but **he’s not**. God sets forth **terms** that he too will be a **blessing** if the people **obey**, but a **curse** if they **don’t**. **Most of all** God wants to bless them with his **presence**, which he does at the end of Exodus when the Israelites **finish** building the **tabernacle tent**.

Exodus 40:34-35 (NIV) 34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 35 Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

God’s presence comes down and fills the tabernacle. The **fullness of God’s presence dwells** among his people. Notice the **form** God’s presence takes when the Lord leads his people away from Sinai.

Exodus 40:38 (NIV) So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

God’s **Spirit** lead them forward as a **flaming column of fire by night and cloud by day**. If you could have God **lead you** this way would you do it? What if he lead you **someplace you don’t want to go**?

He led the Israelites to the **promised land** but when they get there they don’t like it. They **complain** and **disobey** God and have already **broken the terms** of the **covenant**. God shows them **mercy**, and **sticks** with them, even though **year after year** for **hundreds of years** they **keep disobeying** God.

That's the thing, right? We **need God even though we disobey** him. We need him **because** we disobey him. Do you **realize** you need God even though you disobey him? Most of the time we think we have to **clean up ourselves before** God will **love us**. Yet we find God **sticking it out** with Israel for **hundreds of years**.

Eventually King Solomon builds a **permanent temple** for God's presence to reside.² After they finish building it **God's presence** fills the inner room called the Most Holy Place like he filled the tabernacle.

1 Kings 8:10-11 (NIV) 10 When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. 11 And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple.

It's this **great** and **awesome** and **wonderful moment** and it probably felt like it was going to **last forever**, but it doesn't. Even though God promised Abraham he was going to bless him and his descendants and through them all the nations, and God promised it **unconditionally**, for the Israelites to actually get to enjoy the temple and God's presence **in the promised land** they had to obey the promises they made at Sinai. And the people don't do it. **God is patient**, but for hundreds of years they disobey God, and so one day the **prophet Ezekiel** gets a vision of God's presence (pictured as a **cloud**) leaving the temple.

Ezekiel 10:4 (NIV) Then the glory of the Lord rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the Lord.

The **presence of God** is departing the temple's **Most Holy Place** and filling the **courtyard**. God leaves **step by step, almost reluctantly**. Can you imagine what that must have felt like? Watching God depart?

Ezekiel 10:18-19 (NIV) 18 Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. 19 While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground... They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the Lord's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.

I have preached **the history of God's presence filling and departing the temple** before. Today I'm **expanding** on it. When I first preached on this I told you about an **illustration** I heard when I was going to seminary. The speaker put up a slide of a **chest x-ray** and said he would ask his **medical students** what was **wrong** with the x-ray. His students wouldn't spot the problem; nor could we. There was **no cloudy mass, no cancer**, no **breakage** or **chipping**, nothing. But, something was indeed wrong. What was it? A **bone** was actually **missing, completely gone**. The problem wasn't presence **but absence**.

The **special presence** of God's Spirit has **left** his people and it is **spiritually** and **socially devastating**. We need **God's presence in our lives**. Without him, it's **devastating**. We can't do this life without God. It's too hard. **If that's you**, you can do what the Israelites did in **captivity**. They get **overthrown** and taken into **exile** in **Babylon**. That time becomes an **opportunity** for them to **repent** and **turn to God** and that's what today can be for you. **Repent** of your **sin** and **believe** again in **Jesus**. Jesus can bring you out of the **darkness** of **your sin** and into the **light** of **his hope**.

God **rescues** them and brings them home and they once more build a temple so God's presence will return. But this is what happens when the people of Israel **finish building the temple**.

Ezra 6:15-16 (NIV) 15 The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

16 Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.

Do you see the **glory cloud** enter the temple once more? No. God's special presence **doesn't return**. This doesn't mean the Holy Spirit isn't at work in people's lives bringing them to **repentance** and **faith**. We **always need the Holy Spirit** to believe in Jesus. But it does mean the Holy Spirit is **absent** from the **corporate people of God** in a **significant** way. But God promises he is going to **fill** his temple **once more**.

Haggai 2:6-7 (NIV) 6 "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. 7 I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the Lord Almighty.

We see this **fulfilled in Jesus**. Jesus is the **incarnation** of God. He is **conceived** by the Holy Spirit and full of the Holy Spirit, full of the very presence of God. When Jesus drives the **money changers** out of the **temple** the people ask him by what authority he does this.

John 2:19-21 (NIV)

19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

20 They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" 21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

Jesus' body is the **new temple**. He houses **God's presence** and the **Holy Spirit**. Remember how the Holy Spirit at the beginning of creation **hovered** over the **chaos waters** like a **bird**? At the **start** of his **ministry** **Jesus** went to be **baptized** in the **Jordan River by John the Baptist** and then this happens.

Matthew 3:16 (NIV) As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

It's as if Jesus and the Holy Spirit are **reenacting the very moment of creation**—**declaring Jesus** is the **beginning of God's new creation**. Not that he himself is a created, but that he is the **origin** of a **new way**, a **new life**, a **new creation**. Do you believe that? **Do you believe** that Jesus has the **power** to start a **new creation** in you? To give you **brand new eternal life** in him? **If you want it**, God has to do something **radical** in you. Do you know what **John promised** just a few verses earlier?

Matthew 3:11 (NIV) "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Jesus is going to **baptize his followers with the Holy Spirit and fire**. Those listening must have thought of **Abraham's smoking fire pot**, of **Moses' burning bush**, of **Israel's fiery** encounter with God at **Mount Sinai**, and of the **glory cloud** and **pillar of fire** that lead the people of Israel by **day** and **night** and **filled the temple**. Maybe they even asked, "Will **God's presence finally return** to his temple?"

Yes, but **not a stone temple**, a **temple made of flesh**. An even **greater temple** had come, **Jesus**. But Jesus **isn't the only temple**. Just like he houses God's presence he is going to **house God's Spirit** in anyone who follows him, the **people of God**, the **church**. That day arrives at **Pentecost**, **50** days after passover, at the **beginning** of the **wheat harvest**.³ A **new harvest** is coming through the work of the **Holy Spirit**.

Acts 2:1-2 (NIV) 1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

What do we see? We see the **Spirit**, the **rûah**, the same “**wind**” or “**breath**” that was there in **Genesis** coming **down from heaven**, coming down from **hovering over** the **chaos** of our **world**, and **filling** these people. The **columns of fire** come, this time much **smaller** and **individual**.

Acts 2:3-4a (NIV) 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...

God’s **presence** has **finally come**. The **Holy Spirit** is **filling** them as he has **never done before**. Did they **already** have the Holy Spirit in them? Yes! They **believed** in Jesus after all. But they didn’t have the Holy Spirit in that same **temple sense** until now. This applies to us as well. If you know Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit, but we can long to be **filled** in a **special way** with the **same power** and **presence** they felt.

How can we **apply** this? Let’s **thank God** for the presence of his Holy Spirit in us. And also, let’s **ask him** for a **special anointing** to live for him and do his work in our world. **Corporately**, as a **body**, we need to ask for the Holy Spirit to **fill** our **church family** in a powerful way. We want him to **lead us**.

1 Corinthians 3:16 (NIV) 16 Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?

This is a **plural “you”**—you all. God dwells in **you, church**. We as the church are the **temple of God**. I want you to **imagine** for a moment that your **favorite celebrity** or **personal hero** comes into church **next Sunday** and **sits down right next to you**. If **Tom** and **Giselle** and their kids **Benjamin** and **Vivian** came to church next Sunday would it **change** what you did? Would you **smile** just a **little bit bigger** when **greeting** them at the door? Like **not** in a **creepy way**... Would you use your **best singing voice**? Maybe you’d go outside to throw the **football** with the **youth** after church. “Hey Tom, catch!” Would you **act differently** and **give your best**? Or, are you already giving your best welcome and worship because **King Jesus** is here? God’s presence dwells among us, living in each of us. Let’s **give him everything**.

The Spirit **marked** a new temple in Acts 2 and filled them so that they could fulfill the blessing **Abraham’s descendants** are supposed to be to the **nations**, so Christians can be that **priesthood to outsiders**.

Acts 2:4-6 (NIV) 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.

Luke includes the word for **nation** (ethnos) here. He wants us to see the **beginning** of the people of God reaching **all the nations with the gospel**. Jesus promised that his Holy Spirit would come, and then his followers would take the gospel to **Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria**, and to the **ends of the earth**. The church from its beginning was meant to be an **Outward Church**. God performs the **miracle of language** so that everyone can **hear the gospel** in their **native tongue**.⁴

My **friend Brian** from my **Ockenga program** and **Doctorate of Ministry** program, who is going to preach here in February, used to be in the **Marine Corps** and had opportunities to go share the **gospel** with locals when he was in **Afghanistan**. He **didn’t speak** their language and he **didn’t** have a **translator**. He was also a **cessationist**, which means he didn’t think the Holy Spirit **performed miracles** like **translating language anymore**. When he got up to speak, the locals listened. When he finished they thanked him and his local contact said that **every single one** of them **understood** what he had said. The Holy Spirit had translated his **English words** to their **Afghani ears**. It **completely changed his perspective**. Now he believes.

God is at work. The Holy Spirit is on the move. He showed up in Acts and he's **showing up today!** One day, God is going to **finish** his **promise** to "fill this house with glory" (Haggai 2:7b). **Jesus Christ** will **return** and make **all** of **creation new again**. We find this promise at the end of the book of **Revelation**, which is a **vision** of this **end of days**.

Revelation 21:22-24 (NIV) 22 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.

Here we find **God's presence dwelling** with **his people forever** and **ever**, and his people **includes** those **foreign nations promised** all the way back in **Genesis 12**. So the question is, do you want the Holy Spirit? **First**, do you want the **Holy Spirit** to help you **repent** of your **sins**, **believe** in **Jesus**, and **receive eternal life**? If **yes**, that's the Holy Spirit working on you. **Second**, do **we as a church** want the **Holy Spirit** to **anoint** us in a **special** way to **spread** the **gospel** to **all the nations**?

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through Apple podcasts or Google Play Music. Read the story of our church here.

¹ The Bible Project Read Scripture tabletop book. Page 9.

² I preached a similar sermon on June 4, 2017 called “The Way of God’s Presence” on Exodus 40:34-38 at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA. <http://www.cornerstonewestford.com/sermons/the-way-of-gods-presence-exodus-4034-38/>

³ Fernando, Ajith. Acts (The NIV Application Commentary Book 5) . Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Later in Acts the Holy Spirit is going to show up at special moments. Here the people speak in foreign languages. In Acts 4:31 it just seems like the Holy Spirit shows up and they speak extra boldly. In Acts 8:17 it just says “they received the Holy Spirit” and in Acts 10:46 it seems to suggest the people were speaking in non-comprehensible tongues, similar to our more charismatic brothers and sisters today (1 Cor 13-14). If there’s one thing we’ve seen from the Holy Spirit’s arc in the Old Testament and as we go through Acts it’s that the Holy Spirit is creative and can’t be pinned down into one way of working.