



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – June 3, 2007

Are You in a Rut?

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## Acts 2:1-21

<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs -- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. <sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. <sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Are you in a rut? Is your family in a rut? Is our church in a rut? I am pretty sure that every soul in this meeting house has spent some days, weeks, months, or even years of their lives in ruts. We each have our own personalized designer ruts, but the experience of being in a rut is universal, and we all know the generic symptoms.

We know our life is in a rut when we have an intimation that our life's path, our true destiny, lies in one direction, but no matter how hard we pedal or how gamely we tug on the handle bars, the muddy groove of daily living just keeps bearing us off course. From time to time we focus our will and courage so intensely that we jump our front wheel out of the rut, and we exult in our sudden freedom. But then the rear wheel catches and we sag as we slide slowly back into the old groove. Over time, a resignation, a sourness, a despair can settle in that erodes the very hope necessary even to mount new attempts to break out. Are you in a rut?

There are, of course, consolations to life in a rut. A rut may not lead to our true destiny, but its path is well worn and easy to pedal. And ruts have the comfort of familiarity. We are freed from the anxiety and responsibility of charting our own path.

But if the path is easy, the price is high. With every bit of our destiny that we compromise away, with every bit of anxiety we avoid by settling for apparent security, with every bit of freedom we cede to the confining rims

of the rut, we give up a bit of life and we take on a bit of death. Life in a rut becomes a life “of quiet desperation.”

Certainly the disciples knew both about freedom and about ruts. Every one of them had jumped the ruts of half-lived lives the day they followed Jesus. When Andrew and Simon dropped their fishing nets, when Matthew gave up his tax box, they broke free to follow the compelling stranger who said he was the way, the truth and the life.

Each disciple probably thought that when they dropped everything to follow Jesus, they had jumped free of their ruts forever. But almost every chapter of the Gospels tells us that it wasn't so. They slipped back into their ruts when they squabbled over primacy. They slipped back into their ruts when they denied Jesus and scattered. And they slipped back into their ruts after Jesus left them and they huddled in the upper room before Pentecost.

Before Pentecost, the disciples had been on the mother of all business trips. They had been on the road with Jesus for over a year: a year away from loved ones; a year of living out of bundled belongings, a year of living hand to mouth. For all the exhausting miles they had tramped during Christ's ministry, for all the wrenching ups and downs of Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, they now found themselves apparently abandoned by their leader and holed up in Jerusalem with no more than 120 bedraggled followers to show for all their work.

Day after day they hid together behind doors locked against their persecutors. The women slipped in and out with food and drink and bits of news from the back streets and alleys of the city.

They had pestered Jesus for a time-table, but Jesus had simply responded, “*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” [Acts 1:6-8].

And so they waited as they had been told, passing long hours alternating between fervent prayer and whispered questions about their fate. They must have longed for their homes, longed for release from the

dusty clamor of Jerusalem, and longed for some resolution - any resolution – that would free them from their rut.

And then, without the slightest warning, it happened. Their cramped room suddenly filled with a sound like the rush of violent wind; and divided tongues, as if of fire, rested on each of them; and “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” [Acts 2:1-4] Like the 7th Cavalry coming over a hill, the Spiritual power Jesus had promised had finally arrived, and the rest, as they say, is church history.

This amazing out pouring of God's Spirit, this awesome launching pad of Christ's church should be our hope and our inspiration whenever we feel we are in a rut – whenever we feel we are not fully living out our calling from God. If Pentecost does not provide this assurance, I can only guess it's because we have some questions about the story that keep us from freely embracing its gift. I want to try to anticipate and discuss some of these questions with you this morning.

For instance, Luke describes such a wild scene, such a UFO-like event, that we can't help but be distracted by the rushing wind and tongues of fire: Perhaps your first question is: Did it really happen exactly like that? Am I meant to take the story literally? Do I believe the story, literally? To you I say that if you let yourself be distracted by the literal descriptions, if your faith rises or falls on the physicality of the event, then you are watching the pitcher's hand instead of the ball, and you are going to whiff! The real miracle of Pentecost is how God's Spirit freed the disciples from their ruts, how God's Spirit empowered them to change the world.

If you were to ask God whether he can really make a sound like a “rushing wind” and “tongues as of fire,” I think God would double over with laughter. And after he wiped the tears away from his eyes he would ask you to look at your neighbor in the pew. Go ahead, take a look! God would simply point to your neighbor and say, “Rushing wind? Heck, I can make one of these! I can make one of these, and you are asking me about parlor tricks like tongues of fire?”

“And not only can I make one of these, I was able to take 12 fickle, semi-literate, Christ-doubting, Galilean yokels, stuck so deep in their ruts that they couldn't see

over the edges, and blow them clear out of their ruts and into a church of such love, and courage, and persistence that they changed the entire world forever. You take the conversion of Roman emperors, the rise of Western Civilization, the building of every cathedral, the glory of renaissance art, the inspiration of Bach, the founding of your town and your state and your country, the setting of every timber in your New Canaan meeting house, and every flicker of faith that has ever crossed your soul and it all traces back to the Spirit I poured out on these 12 bumpkins, and you're asking me about loud noises and bright flames?"

And then God might pause and clear his throat and lean forward saying, "Oh yes, just one more thing. I have poured out this very same Spiritual Power on you and on every other person sitting in this room. I have baptized every one of you with my Holy Spirit. You need only claim your spiritual inheritance to clear even the deepest ruts of your life."

Well, after you have recovered from God's answer to your first question, perhaps you raise a second. You say the Pentecost story is all well and good, it's just that **you** have never had such an experience. You say **you** have never had great ecstasies, that **you** are skeptical of mystery, that **you** trust only your own powers of life. To **you** I say the Spirit is a reality for everyone, available to everyone, working to free everyone from their ruts.

Perhaps the Spirit's work in your life has simply been more subtle, more easily overlooked. Paul Tillich once listed some of the quieter works of the Spirit, asking his listeners whether they hadn't observed them in their own lives. Don't you recognize at least some of these? [Paul Tillich, "The Spiritual Presence" in The Eternal Now.]

The Spirit can work in you with a soft but insistent voice, revealing to you that your life is empty and meaningless, all the while nudging you to the door that will open to new hope and new meaning.

The Spirit can give you the courage to say "yes" again to life, even after experiences of disease or betrayal or loss have moved you to say "no."

The Spirit can show you that you have hurt somebody deeply, but it can also give you the right word, the right gesture to heal the rift between you.

The Spirit can help you love, really love, someone you profoundly dislike. The Spirit can overcome your tired surrender to your rut, and bear you back onto the path of your calling. The Spirit can transform moods of aggression and depression into stability and serenity.

The Spirit can give you the strength to throw off irrational fears and give you the courage to take on the anxieties that flow unavoidably from the uncertainties of life.

The Spirit can give you a sense of purpose and peace in the midst of ordinary routine, and it can give you unexpected joy in the midst of mourning or sorrow.

The Spirit can throw you into a hell of despair about yourself and then give you the certainty that life has accepted you just when you felt totally rejected, and just when you had rejected yourself totally.

The Spirit can give you, in fact only the Spirit can give you, the power of prayer – for every true prayer – with or without words - is a work of the Spirit speaking in us and through us.

If you have ever experienced a power working within you revealing, healing, restoring you in any of these ways – then you have experienced the Spirit of God. These are the works of the Spirit. These are the signs of God's Spirit working with us and in us. Can you really say that you have never been touched by the Spirit, never supported by the Spirit?

Perhaps this leads you to one final question. Perhaps you want to ask what you must do to summon this Spirit, to earn this Spirit, to direct this Spirit. To you I say the answer has always been: nothing at all. God's Spirit cannot be summoned, it is always present. As Paul taught, the Spirit dwells within us - our bodies are its temple. [Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:16.] God's spirit cannot be earned; it is a gracious gift of a God whose love for you knows no limits. And God's Spirit cannot be directed, for, like the wind, the Spirit bloweth where it will. [John 3:8.]

Still the Pentecost story does have its lessons to teach us this morning. Even if God's breeze is always blowing, it is still up to us to hoist our sails. Like the disciples, we can turn to Christ, follow Christ, cling to Christ. Like the disciples, we can wait for the Spirit, watch for the Spirit, and pray for the Spirit. Like the disciples we can gather as Christ's church - praying together, singing together, supporting one another in our Spiritual quest. Like the disciples we can obey the Spirit: Moving when it nudges us, speaking when it prompts us, serving when it enlivens us, and loving when it warms our hearts. Remembering always the discipleship to which we have been called by our baptism and the church into which we have been gathered by our covenant.

For God has sent his Holy Spirit not simply to free us **from** our ruts, but also to free us **for** a purpose: to be Christ's church, to be Christ's disciples, to be Christ's "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" until everyone who calls on the Lord will be saved. **Amen.**