

## Sermon Series: Questions God Asks

“Who are we to withhold the water?” - by Jason Byassee

Boone UMC

Acts 10:44-48

May 24, 2015

I don't ordinarily do this, but I'd like to start with a prayer. This prayer to the Holy Spirit has been prayed on Pentecost in the church for centuries. Let us pray.

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth Your Spirit, and we shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.*

*O, God, Who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord, Amen.*

Pentecost is one of the great holy days of the church. It's more important than Christmas. For centuries, the church did without Christmas, but there's never been a church without Pentecost. Without Pentecost, Easter doesn't help us very much. Sure, Christ would be raised, but how does that affect our lives? *With* Pentecost resurrection can happen in our lives too. Without Pentecost, you and I would never have heard of Jesus. *With* Pentecost even you and I can become saints. That is, people on fire with God.

Today is part of our series on *Questions God Asks*. I was driving my kids to school this week, they saw the sign outside church, and one asked me “When will *Questions God Asks* be over?” Sorry, maybe we've gone on a bit long, all of Lent and now all of Easter. We start a new series next week on the *Body of Christ* that'll go for a month. So this is the last question God asks, and it's this.<sup>1</sup> *Who are we to withhold the water?* In the story, I'm about to read to you, St. Peter has been preaching to gentiles. This is a dangerous thing. Gentiles are separate from Jews, they're not God's people, they're pagans, don't eat with them, certainly don't marry them (I think all of us in this room are Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, by the way). And yet *these* gentiles are interested in *God*. So Peter preaches.<sup>2</sup> And the Holy Spirit is poured out on them. And they speak in other tongues. And the disciples say, hey, if *God* blesses these pagan gentiles, *who are we* not to baptize them? And they do. Usually in Christianity folks first believe, and *then* are baptized, and *then* receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But here in the bible things are much stranger than that. The

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<sup>2</sup> <http://st-takla.org/Gallery/var/albums/Saint-Mary/10-Feast-of-Penticost/www-St-Takla-org--Damiana-Monastery-icon-HolySpirit.jpg?m=1419425416>

gentiles believe, *then they receive the Spirit's gifts*, and then the church says huh, weird, well, guess God wants us to baptize them. And we do. As we listen, let us stand and sing and turn toward God's word.

### **Acts 10:44-48**

*44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.*

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the Pentecost people of God, **thanks be to God.**

One thing I love about God is the way basic primal human stuff teaches us about God. Last Saturday, we baptized 8 of y'all in the Watauga River. I charged all of y'all to remember you are baptized and thank God *every time* you see water. For baptized people, water is a different thing. Because God meets us in such simple things as water, or dirt. God uses dirt to teach us about God. God picks up dirt to blow life into Adam and Eve. One day God will pick up the dirt we've become and blow life into us again. Earth and Water, that's two of the four primal elements. The other two are picked up today, Pentecost, Fire and Wind.

Pentecost has always had images of fire.<sup>3</sup> On the first Pentecost tongues of fire rest on the disciples and they speak in languages they don't know. Visitors from all over the world in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival hear their language being spoken. This would be like our church showing up in Cherokee for our mission trip in a few weeks and one of our little ones miraculously speaks fluent Cherokee. That's how God works. God will connect people despite language barriers—God's fire melts those barriers. Fire burns, cauterizes, cleanses. Some scientists think it was the advent of cooking over fire that allowed our species to evolve. Once we could cook food on fire it didn't take as long to hunt or forage, we get more energy out of the food, we develop bigger brains, we argue over who does the dishes, and voila. No fire no us. Fire is also dangerous, said every mother ever, don't touch that! It's hot! Fire is light and heat and food, fire is life and it's danger. And God is all those things—light and heat and food and life and dangerous. Earth, fire, water—every created thing tells us about God.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://soulpainter.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/pentecost-el-greco-detail.jpg>

Today is also a special day in Methodist land. We call it Aldersgate Sunday. On this day in 1738 John Wesley said he felt his heart strangely warmed. That's basic Methodist language. He'd been a failure at all he'd tried. And someone asked him a question he'd never heard before, John Wesley, is Jesus *your* savior? He said I know Jesus is savior of the world? They said "Not what I asked. Do *you* know him?" Wesley realized that Jesus died for *his* sins, even his, not the whole world in general, but for the failure *he* was. And his heart still hasn't cooled off. Pastor Luke tells of being in the jail with one of our King Street Church groups and a prisoner there saying he felt like there was a cigarette lighter under his heart. John Wesley all over again.

Now wind. Do this with me.<sup>1</sup> Breath in. Hold it a moment. Breath out. Good. That was a conspiracy.<sup>4</sup> The Latin root of the word conspiracy is "breathe together." Breath is what it means to be alive. If there is no breath there is no life. This is true of God too. Without breath, there is no God. The Holy Spirit is the very breath of God. And God is always going around breathing life into things. God first makes Adam out of mud and then blows life into his nostrils. When Jesus is raised he breathes on the disciples and they transfigure into apostles. Air is basic. Barbara Brown Taylor, preacher I admire, says this about our atmosphere<sup>5</sup>

*Beneath this veil is all the air there ever was . . . The same ancient air just keeps re-circulating, which means that every time any of us breathes we breathe star dust left over from the creation of the earth. We breathe brontosaurus breath and pterodactyl breath. . . We breathe the same air that Plato breathed, and Mozart and Michaelangelo, not to mention Hitler. Every time we breathe, we take in what was once some baby's first breath, or some dying person's last. We take it in, we use it to live, and when we breathe out it carries some of us with it into the next person, or tree, or blue-tailed skink, who uses it to live.<sup>ii</sup>*

Air is amazing. Breath is primal, basic. And now all four elements show us who God is: earth, wind, fire, and water. They're only *there* to tell us how beautiful God is and how much God loves us. Sometimes folks wonder about those who don't hear the gospel—how is God merciful to them? But everyone who's ever lived has experienced earth, wind, fire, and water. And so they've had a brush with God. There's a story from the church in India of a little fish.<sup>6</sup>

*"Excuse me," said an ocean fish. "You are older than I, so you can tell me where to find this thing they call the ocean?" "The ocean?" said the older fish. "It is the thing you are in now."*

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<sup>4</sup> "Con (with) suspire (breathe) = conspiracy, breathe together

<sup>5</sup> Attributed to Barbara Brown Taylor

<sup>6</sup> Attributed to Anthony de Mello

*“Oh, this? But this is just water. What I’m seeking is the ocean,” said a disappointed fish as he swam away to search elsewhere.*

For a person to wonder where God is, is like that fish wondering where the ocean is. Every breath of every creature shows God’s kindness.

Fire and wind are also dangerous. Think of the mightiest wind you’ve ever seen. I remember being in a hurricane in Florida when I was a kid, my family is trying to tune in a radio to get news, and I look outside <sup>7</sup>and there are trees swirling around—the power of the wind is death dealing, awesome. Fire—we’ve all burned ourselves, a burn is more serious pain than any other. The Spirit is dangerous, death dealing, in addition to life giving. That’s who *God* is.

Y’all have heard of Pentecostal Christians? Really there are no Christians who aren’t Pentecostal, we’re celebrating Pentecost today, but in 1906 in Los Angeles a revival broke out at a place called Azusa Street. This was not unusual, we Methodists come from revivals in England and the US South...they had gone on for centuries. But this one was different because folks spoke in tongues. That is they spoke what sounds to us like gibberish, but to them was the language of the Holy Spirit. The bible does speak of *glossolalia*, ecstatic speech, praying in a language we don’t know, that nobody knows but God. And so these folks did. In 1905 there were 0 people in the world who would call themselves Pentecostal. Now we are on our way to one billion Pentecostals. Here’s what I love about the Pentecostal movement. God reminded us, his church, that God is Holy Spirit. That God is in control. And we aren’t. Do you feel a little afraid of Pentecostals? A little wary? I do. I mean, they’re holy rollers, right? Crazy people. Not our cup of tea or we wouldn’t be Methodists (I mean we got pews in here). Well, that’s because Pentecostals make clear we’re *not* in control. Anything can happen. God is alive and loose in the world. And we can’t control God. Here’s something else Pentecostals do. They break down barriers. Because that’s what God does. The first two Pentecostal preachers at Azusa were two different races, one black, one white. Blacks and whites did not gather together for church in this country in 1906...until the Holy Spirit said to. Pentecostals have always been more multi-racial than us mainline Protestants. Pentecostals have also had women preachers a lot faster than us. If someone has the Holy Spirit who are we to say she can’t preach?<sup>8</sup> That’s Aimee Simple McPherson, she was the Billy Graham of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, fiery Pentecostal preacher. And hey, if the Holy Spirit said preach who were we to stop God?

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.sailingscuttlebutt.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/hurricane.jpg>

<sup>8</sup> <http://media-1.web.britannica.com/eb-media/09/113309-004-DAE70C9B.jpg>

At the first Pentecost, this happened.<sup>9</sup>

*Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappodocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs (Arabs? Yep, the bible says Arabs)—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.*

There’s a terrible old joke that says war is God’s way to teach geography to Americans. God’s way to teach geography to Christians is called missions. Suddenly we care about all these places because God’s Spirit is poured out there making the church. A pastor from Syria says this to us Christians in the west. <sup>10</sup>“Cherish the faith we’re dying for.” Did you hear that? “Cherish the faith we’re dying for.” Christianity for us can seem so trivial, a matter of seeing and being seen, or helping our business, something you yawn through. In Syria, Christianity is something your family can be murdered for. The Holy Spirit is suggesting *we* take Jesus a bit more seriously. A moment without Jesus is like a moment without breath.

Here’s how God also works. God works across cultures. Christianity is a faith that you can only keep, by giving it away. Strange, but it is so. The sure way for a church to close is to stop taking risks to reach out. And the way for us to grow, is to give ourselves away--our faith, our money, our energy. And here’s what happens as we give ourselves away. We get ourselves back! Only better! When we give faith away *our* culture is “relativized”. To be a missionary is to realize, hey, we need to set our own culture aside. And we need to learn the other culture, their language, their customs, their food. There is a stereotype out there that is a lie that says Christian missions are always culturally insensitive. Find me a film or a book where missionaries are portrayed as anything other than blundering Neanderthals or evil monsters. Back here, in the real world, in every little village in Africa or Asia or Latin America you’ll find some missionary translating the bible into a very difficult language. *And* you’ll find bulldozers ready to knock things down and build McDonalds. Which one is culturally insensitive again? That missionary had to lay aside her culture’s superiority and honor a new culture—for Jesus.

This is different from Islam. In Islam everyone learns Arabic, everyone faces Mecca. Islam tends to hold on to territory and homogenize it. Christianity is different. Christianity seems to be a

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 2:7-11

<sup>10</sup> Attributed to an evangelical Syrian.

thing that dies in the middle and renews itself on the edges. Like a fire. The Middle East used to be Christian and now largely isn't. Western Europe used to be Christian but now largely isn't. The place where the church is growing like Pentecostal fire is in Asia, Latin America, Africa. But God's not done with those old places! The largest church in all of Europe is in Kiev Ukraine and is pastored by, wait for it,<sup>11</sup> a Nigerian immigrant pastor. Three of the four largest churches in downtown Edinburgh Scotland have closed, become nightclubs. The fourth is filled with immigrant Christians from Africa trying to figure out how to minister downtown. That's the way God works y'all! God's Pentecostal fire keeps popping up in unexpected places.

How about in your life? Have you ever felt *on fire*? That everything you touched was turning to gold? When I visited with one of you recently when you'd just given birth you looked radiant. Like you could write a symphony or run a marathon after 7 hours of labor. I remember a friend presiding at communion one time, the light was coming through the window just right and it looked like she was on fire...a halo effect of some sort...like if you touched her it might catch and you'd burn.<sup>12</sup> *The Hunger Games* and other contemporary media have this "girl on fire" theme, that's an echo of Pentecost, even if they don't know it.

Or, maybe being on fire is not where we're at. Lots of folks feel burned out. Dried up. Here's the good news. The Spirit wasn't supposed to come to us gentiles. Europe was supposed to be done with Christianity. And there's God, popping up where we didn't expect. Here's the great thing about wind and fire. They answer to themselves alone. They're free. We can't control 'em. They can pop up again any minute. Like God.

At my first church, two members were running against one another for a seat on the county commission. They were the two historic families at this little church, one represented old money, the other came from sharecroppers. By the end of the election they couldn't stand each other. But one day during communion they found themselves face to face when it was time to pass the peace. And one stuck out his hand. The other shook it. Then they went back to not speaking! He told me later "I can't believe I did that. But I guess if there's any place we should be reconciled it's right before the Lord's Supper." That's the Holy Spirit, doing things we can't imagine. I wonder about in your life? When has the Holy Spirit just erupted when you weren't planning on it? Like fire. Like wind. Like God. Making all things new.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.standwithsunday.com/images/call%20to%20action.jpg>

<sup>12</sup> [http://fc00.deviantart.net/fs71/f/2012/195/1/2/profile\\_picture\\_by\\_girl\\_on\\_fire\\_forever-d5770wl.jpg](http://fc00.deviantart.net/fs71/f/2012/195/1/2/profile_picture_by_girl_on_fire_forever-d5770wl.jpg)

Over the years we've had a number of coaches at Appalachian get involved with our church. One told me this story about a famous men's basketball coach. He had been a tyrant. Screaming, yelling, abusing, cussing, really mistreating his players, a Bobby Knight type. Well, he had a conversion. Jesus seems to have been involved. And he looked back on his life and felt lousy about how he had treated his old players. So he invited each one to spend a few days with him. Took them to dinner...and apologized. One by one. I'm sorry I was so hard on you. I was trying to help. It was my own insecurity. I shouldn't have done it. I love you. And don't you imagine each one felt the wind of the Holy Spirit? Smelt something burning, like the fire at the center of the earth that fell on Pentecost?

Let me tell you something about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the shy person of the Trinity. You can't look at the Spirit directly. You can only look at Jesus. The Spirit doesn't want attention for Himself, the Spirit is constantly showing us Jesus, pointing us to Jesus. No one can see the eternal Son of God without the Holy Spirit. But *with* the Spirit *all* we can see is Jesus. Here's something else about the Spirit. The Spirit folds us into the life of God. The Trinity isn't just something we look at or study. The Trinity is God with us, God in us. Have you noticed I pray this way? That the Spirit would make us into Jesus? Really that's every prayer there is. *Holy Spirit take hold of us.* Transfigure us into Jesus' own body. If we can't see the Spirit we're like the fish looking for the ocean. The Spirit is our next breath. Breathe with me. Now pray this prayer as you breathe out,<sup>13</sup> Come Holy Spirit. Again. Come Holy Spirit. Again. Come Holy Spirit. Breathing Holy Spirit we're transfigured into Jesus. Now we're on our way to being truly human.

Let's close with the prayer I opened with, will you pray it with me?<sup>14</sup>

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth Your Spirit and we shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.*

*O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord, Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor from her *Home By Another Way*.

<sup>ii</sup> Story is from Anthony DeMello via Ken Shigematsu in his terrific book *God In My Everything*.

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