

“Spirit and Power: Locomotive or River?”

Acts 1:6-8; 16:1-11

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1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

My paternal grandfather, John Hink, loved steam locomotives. He worked at a Boise Cascade sawmill on the Columbia River for over 30 years. And long trains pulled by steam locomotives brought logs into the mill and took lumber out. Steam locomotives were critical for the success of the mill.

As a kid I was with him a couple times when the locomotives brought logs to the mill. You could hear the whistle a long way off. The excitement started. And then you saw the smoke above the tree line getting closer. And before you even saw the train, the ground began to shake. And then you saw it, big and black with a long train of cars hauling logs stacked high. As it got closer and slowed you couldn't hear anything else. It was all steam and smoke and mechanical growl as the track groaned, straining under the load. It was power and a type of “wildness” you could feel up close. I understood why my grandfather loved steam locomotives.

I would have liked to see the Big Boy steam locomotive that came through our area about a month ago. It was part of the 250th anniversary of the United States. The Big Boy was built in 1941. It is the largest steam locomotive ever built. It's 133 feet long and weighs 1.2 million pounds. It has 16 driving wheels and 8 directional wheels. It was built to haul heavy equipment over the Rocky Mountains during WWII. After the war it hauled freight for 20 years. I would have liked to stand close to the track and again feel the power and “wildness” as it lumbered by.

II. Text and Exegesis

The book of Acts begins with a promise from the risen Jesus: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Act 1:8) The word “power” in Greek is “dynamis.” It's where we get the words “dynamic” and “dynamo” and “dynamite.” It seems to indicate an explosive type of power. It seems to be like a steam locomotive; a power and “wildness” that pulls you along and can't be stopped, so that you just jump on board for the ride. Jesus seems to be saying that the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit is coming to drive the mission of the Church: hear the rumble, feel the ground shake, get on board.

And so it also seems as Acts tells the story. The Church begins with preaching and healing. Thousands believe in Jesus and join the Church. The Church then breaks through persecution and arrests. Next converts come from Samaria and the distant African kingdom of Ethiopia. Old boundaries and prejudices can't stop the Spirit.

And the high mountain between Jews and everyone else is no match for the Spirit. It powers over that when Peter, a Jew, goes to the home of Cornelius, a Roman Centurian. Peter preaches. The Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius, his family, and friends. Peter then says, "Baptize them all. God has made them a part of the Church."

Next is Paul. The one who once persecuted Christians becomes a Christian. The Holy Spirit converts his heart and mind. And he becomes a missionary. And riding the Holy Spirit train, he travels to new places and preaches. And more people believe.

Church fights can't even stop the power and "wildness" of the Spirit (thank goodness). Despite push-back, the Church leadership decides to get on board with the mission to both Jews and gentiles. And so Paul begins his second mission trip in the power of the Spirit.

That brings us to our second reading, Acts 16:1-11. Hear the whistle. See the smoke. Feel the ground shake. The Spirit is moving the mission forward.

Read Acts 16:1-11.

Paul revisits the churches he started on his first mission journey. He wants to report the good news from the Church leadership in Jerusalem. And he wants to encourage his friends. Being a Christian was not easy.

And while in Lystra he meets a young man by the name of Timothy. Paul wants to take him on the mission trip. His mother is a Jew who believes in Jesus. But his father is an unbelieving Greek, so Timothy has not been circumcised as a Jewish male. What to do? The Church Council in Jerusalem just decided that salvation was a gift of God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Circumcision, dietary laws, and Jewish Sabbath observances were not necessary. You don't have to become Jewish to become a Christian. But Paul has Timothy circumcised anyway. He doesn't want anything to distract from their mission and the message of Jesus. The mission moves on. The steam locomotive is at full throttle.

But an interesting thing then happens. Paul wants to go west. But something happens and he can't. So Paul decides to take the mission north. But something happens there also, so he can't. But this time Paul may believe he's just along for the ride. So he ends up in Troas, a seaport. And it's there he has a vision. A man from across the water in Philippi says, "Come and help us." And so Paul does. The Christian mission of the Church for the first time moves into Europe. Philippi is in modern day Turkey. Philippi was a surprise to Paul. But when you jump on the train you end up in surprising places. Indeed, Paul has begun to go to the "ends of the earth" as Jesus promised.

III. Theological Reflection

It seems the power, the “dynamis,” of the Holy Spirit is driving the mission of the Church and is as powerful and “wild” as a steam locomotive. You seem to be able to see it, hear it, and feel it. The ground shakes and miracles happen, converts form churches, opposition is overcome, and you end up in distant places like Phillipi. It seems all so clear. There seems to be no doubt. A steam locomotive, the power of the Spirit, is not subtle.

So I wonder “What happened?” Maybe you’re wondering that also. The power and the “wildness” of the Holy Spirit driving the mission seems a rarity now, at least in my experience over 40 years. It’s not like Acts. I would like to feel the ground shake once in a while.

We wonder a lot at 1st Church. We experiment and try new things. We are not afraid. So we pray and plan and organize. We do new missions. We plan our community art program. Bill and I do the best we can to lead worship and preach every Sunday. Our music program is good. Our online worship services are good. We help feed hungry Sharon kids. We host all types of different programs for our community. Some things work. And other things not so much. And rarely is it as clear as it all seems in Acts.

But, I’m wondering, was it really that clear, that dynamic, as Acts seems to suggest at the time? Maybe looking back and telling the story, they can see the Holy Spirit was that steam locomotive driving mission. But at the time when decisions were being made it really wasn’t that clear. Maybe it was more like our experience: you pray, you plan, you hope, you have faith, and you do. And only when you look back do you clearly see the work of the Spirit. What do you think?

Indeed, steam locomotives brought logs into the Boise Cascade lumber mill where my grandfather worked. But there was another power that brought even more logs. It wasn’t loud. It wasn’t all smoke and steam. The ground didn’t shake. It didn’t announce “Here I am.” Rather, it was much more subtle. It was the Columbia River. The mill was built right on the shore of the Columbia River. And from the Columbia River, the mill drew both water so the boilers could make steam to run the mill, and logs. Lots of logs. Logs floated down the river in large “log drives” held together by log booms and directed by special boats. The power of the Columbia River was in the flow of the river. And you really only saw it when the hundreds of logs were floating down the river together, and in the stories told afterward. And though it did not call attention to itself, no one doubted the power of the river.

Certainly a river can be powerful and “wild” as it flows over rocks and waterfalls, and cuts gorges through earth and stone. But most of the time it’s quiet. The power is in the flow. And you only experience that power when you have the faith to make the choice to get in the water and be part of the flow. Grand Coulee Dam harnesses that power of the Columbia River.

So maybe the power of the Holy Spirit for the mission and ministry and life of the Church is more like a river than a steam locomotive. Yes, powerful. But more subtle. And maybe

part of it is to have the faith to choose to share in mission, to preach a sermon, to be generous, or to welcome all to the table of the Lord. And when we do that, we get into the water and experience the power of the flow of the Spirit. And you never know for sure, but the power and flow of the Spirit just might take you to distant places like Philippi.