

## On being out of control

Acts 2:1-21

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist  
*Community Christian Reformed Church (Dixons  
Corners, ON)*

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I'll bet that you could never guess what I was doing two Sunday mornings ago at this time?

I was white-water rafting.

How many of you have been white-water rafting? Isn't it great? Now, especially, in the late spring, when the water is deep from the melting snow up north, and bone-chilling cold, ah... There you are in the rafts, 6 of you, 10 of you, hurtling down the rapids of the Ottawa River, leaping over these marvellous waves, surfing the crests of some of them in the rafts, even getting turned around and going down the falls backwards. Wow!

But, do you know one of the things that I remember most about the trip down the river? It was Sunday morning, about this time, and one of the guides said, "Would anyone like to body surf this next rapids?" Well, do you think that I was going to miss out on this? No way. So, along with 5 other brave -- or is that foolish -- souls, I swam out against this raging current in order to be swept down over the rocks lying about 50 metres downstream.

And then there was a moment when I said: "What the heck am I doing here?" It was when I realized that, though I had a wet-suit on, it was mighty cold, and that water was mighty strong, and I was getting mighty tired swimming against a current that was basically pushing me toward an island, rather than toward the rapids.

But, I certainly couldn't go back. I had gone too far. (You know I'm Swedish and Swedes love to tell jokes about Norwegians. Did you hear the one about the Norwegian who thought he could swim across this huge lake? He swam across until he was about 50 feet from shore, realized he was too tired to go any further, and so he swam all the way back.) Well, I wasn't going to do that. Partly because I couldn't.

And then the scout on the shore gave me the thumbs-up sign, I turned my feet downstream and surfed. Great, right? Yes, it was. It was exhilarating and fast. And then I hit the rapids and down I went, upside down, pushed under the water, with my wet-suit, helmet, sneakers, pulling me down and the water throwing me around. But, I came up, probably mostly due to my life-jacket and slowly and laboriously I swam toward the shore ... and crawled back to the world.

Phew! I'm exhausted just thinking about it, and you probably are listening.

So, you ask, what does this have to do with Pentecost? The answer: everything.

You see on that day, 50 days after Passover, 50 days during which the followers of Jesus had been praying and waiting, locked in their rooms for fear of coming out and being hunted down by the Jewish or Roman authorities, 120 men and women, followers of Jesus who had been crucified and yet who had been raised from the dead on the Sunday after Passover and had even appeared to them during 40 of the previous 50

days, telling them to wait until they were clothed with power from on high... on that 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover, these 120 men and women were pushed with all God's might from their upper room and like a mighty river were carried into the streets, shouting, and singing, and laughing, probably turning head-over-heels cartwheels, dancing and acting as if they had been drinking way too much early wine. Like me going down the rapids, carried by a force way beyond my strength, they were being pushed and shoved, carried out into a world that they feared. They were completely out of control, just as I was when I was caught by that current and was swept down that river.

Now in my case, I chose to do it, even though when I was in that current, I had no choice but to go along with it. But, they never chose to be thrust out into the streets of Jerusalem by the Spirit. That was the LAST thing they would have chosen, to be pushed out among the very people that had cried out for the Lord Jesus' crucifixion. But they had no choice.

And what a scandal it caused. Among this Law-honouring and Law-abiding people, gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the covenant of the Law, suddenly these fishermen, and scandalous women, people associated with this criminal Jesus, are suddenly running around like a bunch of drunks, out of control, or better said, controlled by the alcohol. "Just what you'd expect from a bunch of Galilean fish-farmers!" they probably said to each other.

But the strange thing and the inexplicable thing is that these people are praising God, not shouting out madness.

Suddenly Peter steps forth to speak. How out of character is this, for a blunt fisherman, betrayer of the Lord, to step forth as spokesman. And eloquently and forcefully he speaks very lucidly. So much so that he appears to be very much in control. But, you and I know that he is still completely out of control, at least out of his own control. In the power of the Holy Spirit, he begins to speak as if he were a learned theologian, a scholar, someone who knows the Old Testament, rather than a fish-farmer with no training.

In fact, in subsequent days, as this kind of out-of-control behaviour continues, even the priests and teachers of the Law will begin to ask themselves: "Where did these illiterate fishermen and women of ill-repute receive their training in the Law?"

No, you see, the 120 were not really out-of-control as such. They were out of "human" control, even out of their own control, but they had been taken over by the Spirit and become God-controlled.

My friends, God is dangerous. God is even more dangerous than the rapids I rode down. Because once you enter into God's presence, you will be out of human control, even out of your own control. All those controls that are put upon you by some well-meaning men, and some not-so well-meaning men, to keep things decent and in order, will suddenly mean nothing. You will begin to realize what Peter said to the teachers of Israel: We are in the power of God and must obey God rather than man.

When the Spirit of God comes upon you, any supposed human control is shattered and God makes Himself known as He his. It happened to Saul, who began to act like a mad-man, concerning whom the people asked "is Saul too a prophet?", that is, someone who is more in the presence of God than in the presence of man. It happened to David, who danced in the Spirit before the Lord, much to the embarrassment of his wife, but to the delight of the people. And when the Spirit promised by Joel would come upon young men and old, free and slaves, male and female, as happened on the day of Pentecost, it would take them out of the control of all of those things that man uses to try to control God and would free their minds, free their hearts, free their emotions, even free their bodies. It can be embarrassing, it can be startling, but it is always for the purposes of making God's will known in the world.

The root of human sin is the desire to be in control, to chart our own destiny, to determine what we will do and do it, to be able to set forth a plan or agenda and to fulfill it. From the very beginning it has been man's desire to do what he wanted to do, whether God wanted it or not. This is what the Scriptures see as the cause of man's continual falling from grace. And it has been God's regular shaking of the foundations that has caused man to see that he is not in control. That there is only one in control, and that is the sovereign God.

But, surely you would say to me, being in control is not all bad. After all, God gave us dominion over the land and seas and air, and all that is in them. Surely being in control of the land is not a bad thing? Surely being in control of diseases and the ravages of plague are not bad things? Surely being in control of people's warring activities and the economies of nations are not bad things?

Well, they are bad things if you think that you are the one who is in control. For order, any order, is really a gift from God to us. The ability to control the land does not derive from us, but from God, who gives us the ability to do so. So it is with medicine, with control of epidemics, of wars, and of economies.

We are reminded of just how little we are in control when we face the elements. It has always been the raging of the elements that has reminded man that he is really not in control. Be it the raging of storms in the mountains, be it ice storms on the plains, be it the roaring of the waters, be it the awesome power of the sea... these are God-given gifts, as Psalm 104 says, to caution us not to think too highly of our own limited power to control things.

Every summer when I go on vacation, I try to make it to the sea. There is something about the sea that beckons me. And there is something about the sea that scares me, something that is so out of control and fearsome that I both delight in it and am terrified by. In fact, as Nate Philbrick of the Egan Institute of Maritime Studies writes: "The sea remains steadfast in its ability to obliterate man's self-made world". Philbrick goes on to quote the great American writer Herman Melville, whose story "Moby Dick", is perhaps one of the greatest sea-stories ever written: "For ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder [man], and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make."

The sea, even more than rapids, has the power to crush vessels upon it and to take the men and women on them into the depths and to overwhelm them and drown them. In Greek literature, the word for this is "baptism".

It is not for nothing that the word we use to describe our initiation into Christian faith is "baptism". It doesn't mean "sprinkle" or "pour" as we sometimes suppose from the actions used in church. But, nor does it just mean "submerge" or "immerse", as if we were washing a shirt in a tub of water. The word "baptism" was the Greek word used in maritime stories to talk about what happens when sailors are thrown from their ships by the roaring waves of the sea and are cast into the sea to drown.

Yes, the word means "drown". "Baptism" is, as Paul so rightly says, "to die with Christ". Not just to have the outside of you washed: to die. To be out of control, as the rapids pull you under and you know that you are not going to make it.

But, though you are out of control as you plunge beneath the waves, you will make it. Or better said, "you" will not make it but someone will. The "you as you went in" will not survive, but the "new you", the one who will come out of the waters by the grace of God. Not snatched from death, but having died and having been re-born to a new and unending life. In baptism, you go into the waters and you are pushed under and you die, but someone comes out, someone else than the one who went in. Before baptism you may have been someone who was in control. But, then you were thrown from the ship, and you drowned in the waters. And you are no longer in control. You are now in the power of the God of the Sea, the God of the Air, the God of the Land, the one God who made all things, who is Lord of Lords and God of Gods.

On the day of Pentecost, those 120 followers of Jesus were pushed by the overwhelming power of God to proclaim the greatness of God. On that same day, 3000 drowned. 3000 lost their lives ... lives of supposed control over their destinies and over the destinies of their people. But, by the grace of God, 3000 new children of God came forth that same day, controlled no longer by their own desires but pushed and shoved and blown by God into every corner of the world. And what they talked about, all that they talked about, was this new life that could be had in Christ, a new life that was like the raging waters all around, and yet in them, behold new life!

Can you feel the rushing waves, the wind pushing you to a new grace-filled life. It is the deep, rushing currents of the love of God in Jesus.

For there is only one who is in control of all.

It has always been the experience of God's people that the gifts the God gives us eventually begin to be considered our right, rather than gifts. When the people of Israel came out of Egypt on that first Passover, God pushed them toward the Red Sea. They were not in control of the sea, which was pulled back by God to let them through, and which rushed in again like hundreds of rapids on the Ottawa River to drown the mightiest army in the Mediterranean, the Egyptian, barely a hundred years or so before we would see the rise of equally great armies in the northeastern Mediterrean, that of Greece and Troy.

But, once on the other side of the Red Sea, the people of Israel begin to think that it is they themselves that have saved themselves. And so God pushes them into the wilderness to wander. God leads them around in circles until they get the point.

At some point in their wanderings, God gives them the Law in order to guide them. It was a gift to them, a means of knowing God was in control and how best to please God.

But, what happened? The Law, rather than being considered a gift, eventually became for the Jews, the way to show that they were in control, and that by fulfilling the Law, they were in control of their destiny as the people of God.

Oh, the element of gift remained. But it was profoundly transformed, as the Law became the gift of God to the Jewish people alone, making them alone distinct of all people.

Centuries later, the giving of the Law was still celebrated, just as Passover was. And when was it celebrated? Lo and behold, on the 50<sup>th</sup> day after the release from Egypt, the Passover. That's right: the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover, the feast of Pentecost, was the day that faithful Jews from all over the world came to Jerusalem to remember and to celebrate that God gave to them, and to them alone, the Law.