

The Day of Pentecost – Acts 2:1-12

Our text begins with the words, “When the day of Pentecost came...”

Pentecost was a Jewish feast day, a day to remember the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai and to celebrate the first fruits of the harvest. It fell exactly 50 days after the Feast of Passover, thus the name, “Pentecost” (pente = 50).

So why would Christians want to remember this day?

We celebrate Pentecost, not as the day we received the law, but as the day we received the Holy Spirit. It was a day marked by great signs from God to declare to the world, “A new day has dawned.” Just as fire and smoke and a great voice from the clouds announced the day of the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, God was once again showing through great signs that something important was happening. No longer was God’s will something you carried around outside of you. Now it was written on your very heart as the Holy Spirit dwelt within the believer.

Jeremiah 31:33 says:

33 “But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD. I will put My law in their minds and inscribe it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they will be My people.

This was fulfilled with the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Christians.

Please do not think that the Holy Spirit was not present before this. We read again and again in the Old Testament of the Spirit of God coming upon different people: Moses, David, King Saul, the prophets.

Then in the New Testament it was clear that the Holy Spirit came on Jesus and guided His life and ministry, and He was there to help the disciples.

However, at Pentecost a new thing was happening. Instead of the Spirit coming only to certain people for short periods of time, the Holy Spirit now resided in the hearts of all believers all the time, bringing the power Jesus spoke about in Acts 1:8, ***“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.”***

As the Holy Spirit came on the believers that day, there were three signs to demonstrate that this was a mighty work of God: the sound of the mighty, rushing wind; the tongues of fire that rested on each believer; and the ability to speak in various languages. Each spoke of the power of God at work in the believers, doing a work that was necessary if they were to be Jesus’ witnesses “in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

Let’s look at each sign this morning.

First there was the sound of a mighty, rushing wind.

When Jesus spoke to a man named Nicodemus during his earthly ministry, he told him that he needed to be born again. This would only be possible through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit was like the wind. In John 3:8 we read:

⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

It is no surprise then that one of the signs of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church as the sound of a mighty rushing wind. But notice how Jesus characterizes the Spirit: like the wind the Spirit comes and goes as He pleases.

So what do you do if you want to ***“keep in step with the Spirit”*** as Paul says in Galatians 5:16?

Instead of fighting the Spirit, instead of trying to do things your way, you put up a sail and let the Spirit take you to where you should be.

The disciples needed to learn that lesson.

Go back to chapter one. It ends with an interesting account of how the disciples decide they need to fill the place of Judas. After Judas betrayed Jesus and took his own life in response to his guilt and shame, the disciples, with Peter leading the charge, decided they needed a twelfth member once again. Though Peter grabs a couple of verses out of the Old Testament to justify what they were doing, we do not get any indication that this was something the Lord told them to do.

The disciples set criteria of who should qualify to take Judas' place, someone who had been with them all along. We learn an interesting fact that there were others besides the twelve Jesus called to be disciples who stayed with Jesus all three years of his ministry. Two names are submitted, Matthias and Barsabbas, and in verse 24 we read the disciples prayed, “Show us which of the two you have chosen.” Then they cast lots, sort of a dice with the names of the candidates on it, and from that Matthias was chosen. And this will be the last time we will hear about Matthias.

Why? I agree with the Bible scholars who see here that the disciples were deciding what they thought was best and then asking God to bless their plans. This was their idea, not God's. After the coming of the Holy Spirit in power, after the disciples learned to put their sail up and be led by the Spirit instead of asking God to bless their plans, we never hear of them “casting lots” ever again. We read the phrase, “the Spirit led them” many times, like when Paul and Barnabas were chosen to be missionaries, or Philip went to the desert to minister to an Ethiopian, but no casting lots. They had learned to be led by the Spirit, to lift the sail and let Him take them where he wanted.

I read of a couple who prayed fervently for God to allow the husband to get into medical school. He was brilliant, compassionate, gentle – everything you want in a doctor. But his letter of acceptance to medical school never came.

The wife was devastated. Her husband would make such a great doctor, and she had prayed so hard that he would be accepted. When her husband entered school to train in bio-chemistry, and struggled with the demands of that field, she prayed again to God, “Why don’t you let my husband get into medical school?” Her prayers continued something like this, “Lord, don’t you know I don’t want to be a poor scientist’s wife?”

Suddenly, in that moment of honesty as she prayed, God revealed her heart to her. She was not praying for her husband’s good, or for God’s will, but for her will to be done. Growing up in a family that struggled financially she wanted more, and felt the life of a doctor would provide her with all she wanted. She wanted God to bless her plans, and she was not seeking his plans.

Her prayers changed to “Your will be done.” Guess what? Her husband never became a doctor, but became an amazing research scientist who went on to publish many articles on discoveries he made that helped with the treatment of various diseases. And he was extremely happy in what he was doing.

The Holy Spirit is like a mighty, rushing wind. We can hold onto our desires and plans and lean hard into the wind, finding hard and growing tiring. Or we can put up a sail, and let the Spirit lead us where He wants us to go.

On the day of Pentecost the disciples were ready to let the Spirit fill them and lead them. They were ready to put up the sail. And the Spirit came as a mighty, rushing wind...

The Spirit came and there were tongues of fire that lighted on the head of each of the disciples gathered there. We are told in Acts 1:20 that there were about 120 people gathered in the upper room that day, men and women, and every single one of them was touched by a flame of fire.

Fire has always symbolized God’s work of purification. In 1 Peter 1:7 we read how our faith can be refined by trials, and in the book of Jeremiah we read how God wanted to refine his people but they would not listen to him.

The prophet Isaiah had an encounter with God that would change his life. As the prophet stood in the presence of God he realized that though he was a religious man, though he was a good man, though he was a follower of God, he was in need of God’s purifying work in his life. He would cry out, “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips” (Is. 6:5 KJV)

What was God’s response to the prayer of his servant who realized his unworthiness to stand in the presence of a holy God, who realized his sinfulness? God sent a seraph to take a coal off the fire on the altar of sacrifice and he touched Isaiah’s lips with the coal, saying, “Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged” (Is. 6:8).

God purified him. Later in the book of Acts we will read a missions report given by Peter to the Church assembled in Jerusalem, and he will tell how God was working among the Gentiles just as he was working among the Jews. He would say, “God made no distinction, but purified their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9).

The cleansing work of the Holy Spirit is a wonderful thing. You will never be the same once the Spirit purifies your heart by faith.

A preacher told the story of a U.S. Marine who was surrounded by the enemy in the Korean War for 30 days. He was unable to sleep properly, wash or shave or clean his clothes. For thirty days he lived in that foxhole, crawling in mud and filth like an animal, his clothes literally rotting off his body.

Finally help came and he was rescued, and taken to a hospital. Medical aides cut the rags and mud from his body, and then he was allowed a hot bath for the first time in 30 days. Afterwards he had a shave and haircut, and slept that night in clean sheets. The soldier said, “If I live to be 100 years of age I will never forget how good that bath felt.”

The preacher concluded his story with these words:

“Yes, to be clean; to be freed from the clinging, contaminating things, is an adventure. The disciples found it. They had been stained with pride and self-centeredness. They had been given to the sin of greed and jealousy. But at Pentecost something happened. They found a deep, inner cleansing. The Holy Spirit came ... in the cleansing signified by the purging tongues of fire. They were made persons fit for the indwelling Presence ... of the Holy Spirit. The blood of Jesus Christ had cleansed them from all sin.”¹

On the day of Pentecost the disciples discovered what it was like to be “purified by faith,” to have their lives cleansed to the very core. Nothing was left to stand in the way of God’s mission for them.

Which leads to the third and last sign, the speaking of new languages (v. 4).

A crowd gathered because of the noise they heard, and so the disciples left the safety of the upper room – left the safety of the church building – to enter the streets and they started to tell people about what God had just done for them. They knew their lives had been changed and they wanted to share the good news to anyone who would listen.

And what a wonderful surprise to find God allowed them to speak in the languages of the people gathered around that house. The Feast of Pentecost attracted people from all over the Mediterranean world, and some speculate there were people from at least 17 different nations gathered there anxious to know what was happening.

¹ Milo L. Arnold, *The Christian Adventure*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1974), p. 64.

It is true, as Bible Scholar William Barclay points out, they all could speak either Greek or Aramaic, the trade languages of the area, but that is not what they were hearing. The text makes it clear, “Each heard their own language being spoken” (v. 6).

Imagine, suddenly being able to communicate in a language you never studied or learned! (I often prayed God would give me that gift when I was in French class – he didn’t). Though I have heard of missionaries who have received this same gift today, standing on the platform in a foreign country and preaching the Gospel in a language they previously never studied, this gift was a sign for that day. It was a message from God.

What is the message?

God had commissioned His people to “Go and make disciples in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19) With this commission came a promise, “Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the ages.” (Matthew 19:20)

On Pentecost God was making it clear He would be with his people as they declared the Gospel to all nations and He would help them. In the Old Testament we read about the Tower of Babel. This tower was being built in defiance of God. So God confused the languages of the people and the project was scrapped. At Pentecost the process was reversed. God took the confusion of many languages and through His Spirit brought unity once more.

That was a life changing day for the disciples and the church. In fact, it was such a dramatic change that we call this the birthday of the church, when God breathed life by His Spirit into a waiting people.

And I conclude with this last thought: Pentecost did not just happen. Yes, it was a mighty work of God, but it was an event foretold in Old Testament (see Peter’s sermon and his reference to the book of Joel) and through the teaching of Jesus. It was an event that Jesus prepared his disciples for when he said wait in Jerusalem. What did the disciples do as they waited?

They prayed. Back in Acts 1:14 we are told that the disciples “joined together constantly in prayer.” The radical change that was needed in the lives of the disciples did not come about simply because they showed up to church that Pentecost Sunday. They were seeking the gift Jesus had promised them. They were on their knees before God confessing sins, seeking guidance and transformation and change. They wanted all of what God had for them, so they surrendered all of themselves to Him.

And in response, God poured out His Spirit on the believers gathered there. Today we celebrate Pentecost and the mighty work of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers and His church. It is a joyous occasion. But may our Pentecost Sunday also find us seeking God for the gift that He promised, the gift of His Spirit within us. May His law, the law of love, be written on our hearts. May we be guided by the Holy Spirit. May our hearts be purified by faith. May our lips proclaim Jesus to a world in desperate need of a Saviour. May we not only know about Pentecost, may we experience it in our own lives as well.