

The Day of Pentecost: Acts 2:1–21

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It's Pentecost Sunday. You can tell that from all the red. It's the only Sunday I get to wear red, except for Reformation Day, which isn't always on a Sunday. Red is the symbol for fire and blood: the fire of the Holy Spirit and for the blood of the martyrs who gave their lives in testimony to Jesus. The history of the church is both fiery and bloody.

Pentecost is the Greek word for the number "fifty." According to the book of Leviticus, seven weeks – fifty days – after the Passover and the Feast of unleavened bread, the Israelites were commanded to bring an offering of newly harvested wheat to the Lord along with sin offerings and peace offerings. Pentecost was a day to rejoice in the goodness of the Lord, who gives grain to the sower and bread to those who eat.

Over the centuries, a second tradition was laid on Pentecost. The rabbis said that Moses received the Torah from the Lord on Mt. Sinai on the day of Pentecost. And so Pentecost came to be a day that celebrated the covenant the Lord made with His people, the promise of land and a nation. For the Jewish people, Pentecost was like the 4th of July and Thanksgiving Day rolled into one. Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after Passover.

Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims for Pentecost. Estimates put the crowds at over 150,000 people, which doesn't sound like much to us, but it was huge to them. On one of the most crowded days of the year, Jesus brings His church out into the public for the first time. Couldn't have picked a better day.

Some people call Pentecost the church's birthday, but this isn't quite accurate. The church was born on Good Friday, when Jesus died in the darkness. And there already was a church of 120 believers on the eve of Pentecost. Pentecost is more like the day the proud parents bring the little one out into public view for the first time. This is the day that Jesus moves His little church out of the upper room and into the world.

Fifty days after the Passover, on the day the people celebrated the first fruits of their wheat harvest, the crucified, risen and reigning Lord Jesus swings His sickle over the fields ripe for

harvest and gathers into His barn the first fruits of His resurrection. Three thousand people who heard the Gospel that day were baptized into the death of Jesus. They were the first fruits of a harvest that's been going on for two thousand years, that reached us in our baptism, and will continue until the end.

On the day the people celebrated the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai when Moses appeared before the Lord in wind and fire and smoke, Jesus blows the breath of His Spirit upon His disciples as tongues of fire settle over each of them, and they all begin speak in languages they never heard or studied before as the Spirit enable them.

Uneducated men and women from Galilee, simple people who spoke with a thick accent, suddenly began speaking in all the known languages and dialects of the world. Everyone heard it in his or her own native language. Parthians, Medes, Elamies, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs. Everyone heard the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection in their own tongue, as though their own mother and father were telling them.

Some were amazed and perplexed. "What does this mean?" they asked each other. They'd never seen or heard anything like this. Rushing wind. Fire. Tongues of fire. Galileans speaking all these languages and dialects. Some were skeptical and made fun of them and said, "They've had too much wine." Now I don't know about you, but I've never met anyone who picks up new languages while drinking wine at nine o'clock in the morning. Usually, the more you drink, the more you tend to lose the languages you already have.

But the disciples weren't filled with fermented spirits but with the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus had promised to send. Peter stood up along with the other eleven apostles. He said, "This is what the prophet Joel was speaking about when he said, 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams; even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.'"

Pentecost is the beginning of the end, the first of the last days. We've been in them for almost two thousand years now. The work of salvation is done. Done to death on the cross of Jesus. "It is finished." The Lamb who was slain lives, raised to life on the third day. And the risen Lord is glorified, seated at the right hand of God, filling all things with His presence. And now

the whole world enjoys a long sabbath's rest by faith in the finished work of Jesus. You and I are in the last days. Pentecost was the beginning. The Last Day is the end. We're somewhere in between. I know you'd like to know more, but that's all we can know and all we need to know.

Jesus had promised His disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit. He told them before He disappeared into the cloud that He would send the Spirit from the Father. The Spirit would guide them into all truth, and speak only what He hears, and tell them what is yet to come. That's how we know that the new testament Scriptures are reliable. They are written by the Spirit-ed breath of God. Not inspired but "expired," exhaled.

People with asthma or emphysema know what it's like to be breathless. You reach deep down for air but there's nothing. Climbing a set of stairs can knock you flat. Some carry oxygen tanks around with them to give them enough breath to get around. It's a terrible thing when you don't have any breath.

Some say the church is breathless, emphysematic, asthmatic. She doesn't seem to have the spring in her step she once did. Seems to be showing her age after two thousand years. They see congregations closing, or little ones like ours struggling to fill their handful of pews on a Sunday morning, and they wonder, "Where's the fire, the wind, the power, the tongues?" They try to cook some up on their own enthusiasms.

Why can't we just open our mouths and speak in foreign languages? It would sure come in handy around here. Imagine Mexican and Korean and Chinese people coming in here to Holy Trinity and hearing this sermon in their very own language and dialect. Like the United Nations only without the interpreters. That would make an impression, I think. Might even make the nightly news.

Some try to jump start things with programs and gimmicks to attract people. Every scheme promises to be the thing that puts breath and life into the church again. But in the end, it's more like a breathing machine than real breathing. Not everything that's "spiritual" is of the Holy Spirit. Jesus warned His disciples that even the antichrists can pull off deceptive signs and wonders that can fool even believers. John says to test the spirits to see whether they're from God. Not every wind that blows through the church is the Holy Spirit. Not every fire that ignites the church is the Holy Spirit's fire. Is all the religious zeal that we see in the big "mega

churches” people on fire from the Lord or people just on fire waiting to be burned out? How can we tell?

Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel. He says that the Spirit will take from what is His and make it known to us. That’s key. The Holy Spirit is no free agent of the Trinity, no independent operator. He speaks only what He hears, and He brings glory not to Himself but to Jesus. In other words, any spirit that doesn’t preach Jesus Christ crucified, raised, and glorified for your forgiveness, life, and salvation is not the Holy Spirit no matter how spiritual he may sound.

The Spirit of Truth speaks the truth. That means, first of all, the truth of our sin. “He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin. That’s the first truth the Spirit of Truth speaks. Sin. That forgotten little three letter word that no one wants to hear much less talk about any more. The Spirit has some bad news for you, and it’s not going to be good for your self-esteem. You are a sinner through and through down to the core of your being. There is nothing good that dwells in your flesh, no matter how “good” you think you are. The Spirit will convict the world of the big sins. Yes, murder is sin. So is idolatry, drunkenness, homosexual sex, and any sex outside of the lifelong union of a man and woman in marriage. So is lying, cheating, stealing, dishonoring parents, disobeying the government. And oh, by the way, in case you think you’ve been doing pretty well lately, coveting is a sin too. Just wanting stuff you don’t need or can’t have. In our way of counting, it even gets two commandments. Go figure.

That’s the truth from the Spirit of truth. And there’s more. He will convict the world in regard to righteousness. That’s the second truth from the Spirit of truth. God is righteous. And in His righteousness, He could damn us all and destroy us. But He doesn’t, and He won’t. Why? Because He made His sinless Son Jesus to be our sin, so that in Jesus, embraced in His death and resurrection we might become the righteousness of God. You want to be perfect and holy? You already are in Jesus. You can’t prove that or see it. You can only hear it and believe it. That’s the work of the Holy Spirit.

There’s more. He will convict the world with regard to judgment. The world honestly believes it’s going to hell in a handbasket unless it does something about it. Even the most irreligious people I know religiously believe that what goes around comes around and there’s going to be hell to pay one day and they deeply suspect the divine bill collector is going to be knocking on their door. When the world hears that Jesus is coming to “judge the living and the dead” they picture the man in the black robes at the judicial bench with the gavel ready to pronounce the guilty verdict and the death sentence.

But the Spirit speaks of judgment in a different way. Not Jesus the Judge come to condemn the world. It's not the world that Jesus condemns. He came to save the world, not condemn it. It's the devil and his demons that Jesus condemns. "He's judged, the deed is done." Done to death in the death of Jesus. That's what hell is designed for. It's for the devil and his minions. It was never intended for people, and God doesn't want anyone to wind up there, and if they do, it's entirely against God's will and the work of Jesus to save them. The Spirit is telling the world, "The devil, your sin, the Law that condemns you, it's all been judged and condemned in the body of Jesus."

That's where the judgment is, in the body of Jesus. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation, "Christ died for all, and therefore all died." Do you want to die for your sins? Too late, you already did in the body of Jesus. Do you want others to die for their sins? Too late, they already did in the body of Jesus. This is the great mystery of the Christian faith. This is what can only be known by the Holy Spirit. This is the true and proper work of the Spirit. Not to put on some fireworks show with wind and fire and speaking in languages. That was the first time only, and the wind and fire were never repeated again.

But what is repeated over and over, what goes on every Sunday for almost two thousand years, is Baptism, the preaching of forgiveness in Jesus, the Supper of His Body and Blood. That is the Spirit of truth at work, delivering the Truth who is Jesus to our ears and minds and hearts.

You are a singularly blessed people. I don't know if you realize that or not. Part of my job is to remind you of that fact. You are wonderfully blessed by God. You have been chosen, elect in Christ from the foundations of the world, appointed and anointed by the Spirit of Christ to proclaim the message of salvation in Jesus to the whole world in all of its languages and dialects. You get to do that. God could have chosen someone else, and maybe you wish He had and left you alone. But He didn't. He called you out of darkness into the light of Christ. He baptized you and filled you with the Holy Spirit. He forgives your sins and feeds you with His own Body and Blood. He sends you out into the world with good news on your lips: Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Are you up to it? Look at what Jesus did with a bunch of Galileans. Watch what Jesus will do with you.

Happy Pentecost.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Acts 2:1-21 (Pentecost B)", posted 2003-06-08
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