

Life in the Spirit

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[0 : 00] I want to start with just a personal note of thanks. I think it was three weeks ago. I sort of lose track of time. Time just is a strange thing now with our third baby, but three weeks ago I was ordained as a priest, and it was an amazing day for me and for our family.

I just want to thank the church for welcoming us into the church family and for encouraging us and supporting us along this process. I'm really grateful to be here. I wouldn't have wanted to be ordained in any other context, so I just want to say thank you.

Before I start my sermon. And before we dive in, I know if your life is anything like mine, life is hectic and it's full of noise. And so what I want to do is give us an opportunity to just quiet the noise, quiet our hearts, quiet our minds, so that we can actually hear from the Lord this morning as I'm preaching.

So let's just take a brief moment of silence to center our hearts and mind to attend to the Lord. Let's be quiet together. Let's pray together.

All truth this morning through the preaching of your word. And that, Jesus, that you would be glorified. We ask that you would speak, for your servants are listening. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[1 : 41] So this morning we're taking a break from the book of Revelation. We've been in that book, the last book of the Bible, for the past several weeks. And we're going to focus on the day of Pentecost.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. If you haven't picked up on that already, that's what it is. And Pentecost just means 50 days. It's 50 days after Easter. And so it marks the end of the Easter season.

And on this day we celebrate the descent, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the church. This day is one of the most important days in the church calendar. And it's also one of the most important days in all of church history.

So think about Christmas, think about Good Friday, think about Easter. Pentecost Sunday ranks up there in the same category with those major events in human history.

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit is as important as the incarnation and the crucifixion and the resurrection and the ascension. And it's as important because it marks the culmination of Jesus' ministry.

[2 : 44] In John 16, Jesus says, You see, without the Holy Spirit, the life of Christ and the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ and the ascension of Christ simply cannot have their intended effect on us in our lives and on the world.

It also marks the continuation of Jesus' ministry. This is also why the day of Pentecost is incredibly important. Through the Spirit-filled and Spirit-empowered church, Jesus continues his mission.

So a few days ago we celebrated the ascension of Jesus Christ. So Jesus ascended into heaven, but that doesn't mean he's done acting in the world. He just acts in the world through his Spirit-filled church.

That's how he continues to expand his mission and his kingdom in the world. So we're going to talk about Pentecost and what it means. And we're going to do that in looking at three different things this morning.

First, I want to juxtapose Babel and Pentecost. I want to talk about how Pentecost is the reversal of Babel. Secondly, I want to talk about why that matters.

[3 : 56] And third and finally, I want to explore what that means for us today living in this city. So first, I want to look at how Pentecost is the reversal of Babel.

And I want us to see this morning how the Bible is telling one overarching story. Everything is interconnected. Everything flows together. You really cannot understand the New Testament unless you understand the Old Testament.

And Tommy's been showing us that in really profound ways as we've gone through Revelation, right? One of the things he talked about, I got a chuckle every time he said it in Revelation, was the demonic locust hordes. Like, there's no way you can understand what is going on in Revelation unless you understand the Old Testament.

And at the same time, the New Testament is the key to unlocking the Old Testament. You can't understand the fullness of the meaning of the Old Testament without the key, without the New Testament that unlocks it.

Because ultimately, everything in the Old Testament points to and culminates in Jesus Christ. And so I want to illustrate that idea, the connection between the Old and the New Testaments, by showing how Babel and Pentecost are connected.

[5 : 00] And so I want to do a little compare and contrast, and show five parallels between these stories. And Luke will have them on the screen so you can track with me, because we're going to get in the weeds a little bit.

But the first thing I want to talk about, sort of starting big picture, is that what happens at the Tower of Babel is the start of a really dark chapter in the Bible and human history.

The curse of Babel, in many ways, accounts for the state of affairs that follow in human history from Babel leading all the way up into the cross. All of human history is marked by division and discord and disunity because of the curse and the confusion at Babel.

And so one way of thinking about it is that Babel, that curse, and that confusion is determinative for all of human history. And so then Babel becomes, one way of thinking about it, is ground zero for the fallen world.

It's the epicenter from which war and strife and division flows into the rest of the world. There's this detail in Genesis 11 that talks about how they settled in the valley of Shinar.

[6 : 05] Shinar is the land of Mesopotamia. That happens to be the place where Assyria and Babylon, two civilizations, the two key civilizations in the Old Testament that were against God and God's people were in that same region.

So it shouldn't be surprising because that's the epicenter of the fallen world. And we see in Pentecost that the day of Pentecost is actually the start of the brightest chapter that we've known in human history.

Pentecost accounts for the state of affairs that follow in the book of Acts and the rest of church history and our history. It marks a new possibility for humanity.

The possibility of reconciliation between God and one another. And it marks the beginning of a new age for human beings in Christ. And so Jerusalem, the city of Jerusalem, is ground zero for the kingdom of God.

It's the ground zero for the new creation. It's the epicenter of the kingdom of God. We see this in the book of Acts, that the gospel is going to spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria, even to the ends of the earth.

[7 : 05] That's where it happens. The second parallel I want to highlight is the difference between disobedience in Babel and obedience in Pentecost.

So the people in the city of Babel were gathered together in disobedience. God gave human beings the commission to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth in Genesis, in the creation account.

And he reiterates that to Noah and to his family in Genesis after the flood. And what we see here in Babel is rather than being fruitful and multiplying and filling the earth, these people actually consolidate their power.

They consolidate their resources for their own security and for their own glory over and against the other people. They desired a tower and a name at the expense of others.

They were disobedient to God. But in Pentecost, we see that the people in Jerusalem were gathered together in obedience. So the Jews were gathered together in Jerusalem because it was 50 days after the Passover.

[8 : 10] And just like Christians who celebrate Pentecost, Jews celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. It's the Feast of Weeks. 50 days after Passover, it's celebrating the wheat harvest. So they're there because they were commanded to be in Jerusalem.

It's one of the pilgrimage festivals when Jews were called and commanded to go to Jerusalem. But they were also there in obedience to Jesus. In the beginning of Acts, Jesus tells his followers, hey, stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes.

And then when the Holy Spirit comes, I'll send you out on mission. So disobedience and obedience. The third thing, the third parallel, is that in Babel, the people were actively trying to displace God. They were trying to displace God by building a tower. And so the people were applying their sort of human genius that God gave to human beings.

They were applying their innovation and their industry. And they were applying it towards the wrong ends. They were trying to set up a throne in heaven to usurp God. And so what the people were doing is they were building a tower.

[9 : 12] And the tower is not just a benign thing. I want us to think less like the Leaning Tower of Pizza and more like Egyptian pyramids. What they were doing was creating a ziggurat. And in the ancient Near East, ziggurats were step temples.

So they looked like pyramids. And they had these steps. And they were understood to be portals between heaven and earth. It was where the gods would come down. And at Babel, it was where the people would go up and take God's place.

So they were trying to displace God by building a tower. They were being very active and ambitious in doing this. But in Pentecost, we see something very different in Jerusalem.

The people are not being particularly ambitious. They're confused. They're pretty disorganized. And they're patiently waiting on God because they don't know what else to do. And as they're patiently waiting on God, they're not building a temple.

But God actually comes down to Jerusalem and fills his people and creates a temple for himself. So you have the juxtaposition between temples. God makes his people into a temple.

[10 : 12] This is what Paul says in Ephesians 2. The church is being built together into a holy temple. That's one of the metaphors used to describe the church. We are a holy temple because we're a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

The fourth parallel is that God descends. It's ironic, right? The people at Babel were trying to displace God by building a really high, basically a skyscraper, to manifest their glory and to usurp God.

But God still has to come down to them. He still has to descend. And God descends in judgment and in order to confuse the people. And he confuses their language.

So they can't work in coordination and cooperation. So they end up dispersing. And what we see in Pentecost is that God descends, but he doesn't condescend in judgment and to confuse.

But God descends to be with his people to bless them and to unite them. And this is a really surprising thing, what God does or maybe what he doesn't do. We might expect him to abolish the multiplicity of languages.

[11 : 14] Because what we see in Babel is that was part of the curse. That's what God used to divide people. And so you think, okay, God's going to unite people. He's going to get rid of all the different languages. They'll just have one language.

But God doesn't do that. He actually unites people through their diverse languages. He uses the diverse expressions of culture and language to create one people.

And so we see that that's how the kingdom is. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of unity without uniformity. And the fifth and final parallel is that in Babel, God scatters his people in order to thwart them.

Because he knows that if they continue doing what they're doing, they'll essentially inoculate themselves from their need for God. And so God comes down and he scatters them as a judgment to thwart their plans.

And what we see in Pentecost is God scatters his people. But he scatters them to accomplish his own plans. Part of his plan is to proclaim the gospel across the whole world.

[12 : 15] And so people have to leave Jerusalem. And they have to be spread out to Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth. So I think it's pretty interesting. I think it's pretty clear God wants us to see that there are these pretty obvious, once you see it, connections and links and parallels between these two mighty acts of God.

But I do think we have to ask, what does this mean and why does it matter? I don't think these are just a bunch of interesting connections and fun Bible facts to impress your friends.

I actually think that seeing these connections really matters. That's why in the lectionary, I didn't choose this Old Testament passage. It was chosen for us. We're supposed to see these connections.

The church has seen it before. It matters because God's trying to communicate something important. Only when we understand the day of Pentecost, in light of Babel and as a response to Babel, can we see what God is trying to show us.

So we have to ask the question, what does God want us to see? Well, I think God wants us to see that at this pivotal moment in the history of the church, the day of Pentecost is very much the founding of the church.

[13:24] God wants to make very clear that the establishment of the church is a reversal of his judgment on the Tower of Babel. And in reversing Babel, God is essentially ushering in a new era, a new epic, a new possibility for human beings in Jesus Christ.

One way to summarize it is this. At Babel, God stymied the capacity of human beings. He limited, in a way, the damage we could do to ourselves and to one another and to creation.

And at Pentecost, God is unleashing the capacity of human beings, spirit-filled, truly human beings, for their good and for the good of the world. At Pentecost, when we're filled with the spirit, humans can finally be fully human.

We can finally fulfill the vocation that God commissioned us into. We can finally be God's image bearers, representing God as we're filled with the spirit in the world.

Another way to look at it is this, that Pentecost means God is finally fulfilling all of his promises. All of the promises, all of the prophecies of the Old Testament are finally coming true in Pentecost.

[14:34] And this is the central promise. We read it right after the Tower of Babel, Genesis 12, when God calls Abraham. He calls Abraham and he says this to him.

He says, I'm going to bless you in order that you might be a blessing. God calls Abraham and he says, I'm going to make your name great, and I'm going to bless you so that in you and in your descendants, all of the families of the earth will be blessed.

And so at Pentecost, God's plan to bless the world, to bless all of the families of the world, to bless the nations through Abraham and his descendants, is coming true. It's actually becoming a reality.

And I think this is why Peter cites the prophet Joel in his first sermon. You know, crazy things were happening and Peter had to step up and explain what was going on.

And it's interesting. I think this is the first joke in the church when Peter says, Hey, actually the people aren't church. It's only nine o'clock. The people aren't drunk. It's only nine o'clock. They can't be drunk. I think it's interesting that Peter, you know, the spirit changes people.

[15:38] He was very serious, I think before, but now he sort of doesn't take himself so seriously. It was a very strange thing that was happening, but Peter makes a little joke, but he has to explain what in the world is going on because it is pretty bizarre, right?

There are tongues of fire and people are speaking in different languages. And the spirit has been poured out on the church. And Peter could have appealed to a passage like Ezekiel 36 and 37.

That's probably the one that would have been most familiar, where God promises that he's going to send his spirit and give the people of Israel a new spirit and give them a new heart, replace their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.

But he doesn't choose that passage. He chooses this passage from Joel. And I think he does that because the emphasis in Joel is that the spirit is going to be on all nations.

Whereas in other passages that talk about the Holy Spirit being poured out, the emphasis is more on Israel and not Israel at the expense of other nations, but it's just not as clear. And so Peter says this in Acts 2:16, but this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel.

[16:42] And in the last days, it shall be God declares that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, not just Israel, but through Israel on all flesh. And so we see we are in the last days.

We are in, we are presently living in this new era where the promise, promises of God are coming true. Because Christ died and was raised and was ascended, the spirit is now poured out on God's people and people of all nations.

And that includes every single one of us that is sitting in this room this morning, Gentiles like us.

And we, as the spirit filled people of God, we get to participate. We become key actors, key players in the drama of redemption that continues to this very day.

As we're filled by the Holy Spirit, and set free from the power and the bondage of sin and death, we're empowered to bear witness. And so third and finally, we've looked at the parallels between Babel and Pentecost, and talked about what it means that the spirit is poured out on all nations. I want to look about, look at what this means for us. Talk about how this lands in our lives today, for those of us who live here and come to this church. So I want to talk about life in the spirit.

[17 : 56] And there are so many ways that we could go in talking about the life in the spirit. We should probably talk about it more. I just want to focus on one thing this morning, as we consider what the life of the spirit looks like, and what it means for us.

And that one thing is just the word strangeness. There are lots of things that were very interesting to me as I was studying the passages. But the thing that just jumped out to me the most was just how strange Pentecost is.

And so I want to talk about that, and acknowledge the strangeness of the life in the spirit, and talk about how we should think about it. So at Pentecost, we see some bizarre things. There's a mighty wind.

There are tongues of fire that appear to be resting over people's heads. There are a group of people who are gathered together, and they're drawing a crowd because they're doing weird things. They're speaking in different languages, languages that they didn't know before.

Nobody knew what to make of it, because it was really weird. Some people were amazed. Some people were perplexed. Some mocked the people because they thought that they were drunk.

[18 : 58] But everybody thought it was strange, because it was. And I think that the life in the spirit, the life that we're called to in the spirit, will always appear strange.

One of the things I considered titling my sermon was, Keep Christianity Weird. Weird. And I think that, as Christians, we are weird. But we're not called to be weird for the sake of being weird.

The reason why we're weird, the reason why we're strange, is because new creation sticks out in a fallen world. It's because resurrection is a strange thing in the land of the dead and the dying.

The spirit-filled life, it ought to stick out. Fully alive, fully awake human beings in the spirit, we just look strange in a sleeping and a dying world.

When we talk about life in the spirit, I think we often focus on the sensational aspects of the Holy Spirit. So things like healings and prophecies and miracles.

[20 : 00] And we should probably talk about those things more. I don't want to minimize them or downplay them in any way this morning. But my focus is going to be less in terms of signs and wonders, and more in terms of the fruit of the spirit, as we're talking about the life of the spirit this morning.

You know, I think that healing somebody is absolutely a miracle by the Holy Spirit. But so is loving our enemy. And so we'll talk more in terms of the latter this morning.

Both of them are very strange. Both of them are miracles. You know, this reminds me of the story of Les Mis. I don't know if anyone's watched the newest Masterpiece version of it.

It's great. Six episodes. You can go through it in a week, probably. Susan and I watch it in like two weeks. We burn through it. So you're probably familiar with the story.

One way of telling the story, it's the story of two men. Jean Valjean and Javert. Jean Valjean is a man who was kept in prison for 19 years. And he was in prison unjustly because he stole a loaf of bread to feed his starving family.

[21 : 05] He tried to escape and they just kept him in prison for a very long time. And he ends up having this really profound moment of salvation where he has extended grace by a priest.

And he is very much a redeemed man saved by grace. And then you contrast, the story contrasts Jean Valjean with Javert. Javert is this police inspector who cares nothing, cares only about just cold, hard, merciless justice.

And he makes it his life goal to pursue Jean Valjean because Jean Valjean lives a life on the run away from justice. And so Javert does a very good job at making Jean Valjean's life very miserable. He chases him his entire life. As the story progresses, Javert is bound by some of the revolutionaries.

And Jean Valjean finds him. And he finally has the opportunity to exact revenge on him and to kill him. But rather than killing Javert, who's made his life a living hell, he decides to set him free.

[22 : 18] And really interestingly, this act of grace and this act of mercy unravels Javert. It destroys him. It ends up destroying him and he ends up killing himself, as I'm sure you know in the story.

And the masterpiece version ratchets it up a little bit. You know, I'm not a Les Mis purist. I've never read the book. I've seen the play on Broadway. But I don't know if this is actually in the story. But it's really powerful in the masterpiece version.

So when they're having the battle, Marius gets injured. Marius is the young man who wants to marry Jean Valjean's daughter, Cosette. And Marius gets shot and Jean Valjean rescues him through these battles.

And he takes him through the sewer of Paris. And it's really disgusting. He risks his life to save young Marius. And as he escapes the sewer, Javert catches him.

And the game's over for Jean Valjean. He turns himself in. And they are riding in this buggy, this carriage. And Javert and Jean Valjean are together.

[23 : 26] They're alone. And they're riding to prison. Jean Valjean has surrendered, submitted himself. And it's this really powerful scene. Javert is just staring at Jean Valjean.

He doesn't understand this man who let him free when he could have killed him. And he doesn't understand this man who has risked his life for this young guy. And so Javert says this.

This is the dialogue from the show. Javert says, That young man, is he a particular friend of yours? Would you say he is dear to you?

Jean Valjean says, Actually quite the contrary. If that young man lives, He intends to rob me of all my happiness. Because he's going to marry Cosette, his daughter.

And there's this pregnant pause. Jean Valjean, or Javert just doesn't understand this man at all.

And he asks this amazing question. He says, Are you insane? And Valjean says, No, I don't think so.

[24 : 30] Are you? And I think the two characters embody two ways of being in the world, both of which appear insane to the other. Valjean embodies the way of grace.

He embodies life in the Spirit. And Javert embodies the way without grace. A life without the Spirit of God. Each appears insane and strange to the other.

Here's a real life example. This makes me think of the families of the nine people who were murdered in the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015.

The families were gunned down during a Bible study. The shooter came in, participated in the Bible study, prayed with them, and then he killed them. And miraculously, and very strangely, all the families extended forgiveness and mercy to the murderer.

The sister of one of the victims said this when she had the opportunity to speak to the killer. She said, I acknowledge that I'm very angry, but one thing that my sister always enjoyed in our family is she taught me that we are the family that love built.

[25 : 43] We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. And I pray that God would have mercy on your soul. You see, in our fallen world that's ruled by bitterness and by vengeance, this kind of forgiveness looks strange.

But this is life in the Spirit. Here are some other examples. In a culture that vilifies and demonizes those with whom they disagree, maintaining friendships and communion, despite serious disagreement, looks strange.

That's one of the things that we're trying to do with the common cup. And this is life in the Spirit. In a culture full of self-righteousness and self-justifying meanness, humility and kindness and gentleness look strange.

But this is life in the Spirit. In a culture that celebrates unfettered autonomy, a life joyfully yoked to Jesus Christ looks strange.

But this is life in the Spirit. In a city rife with discontentment and despair, waiting patiently on the Lord in hope looks strange.

[26 : 54] But again, this is life in the Spirit. In a city marked by flakiness and broken promises, faithfulness to your word, faithfulness to relationships looks strange.

But again, this is life in the Spirit. In a world, this is the last one, ruled by the law of self-preservation and self-advancement at the expense of others, a life of radical self-giving love looks strange.

But this is life in the Spirit. All of these things, manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit, the life in the Spirit, they appear strange in our dying world.

But they actually go with the grain of the universe. Life in the Spirit goes with the grain of the universe. It's a universe that's created and held together by the love of God.

And so I think as Christians, as we reflect on the life of the Spirit, we need to acknowledge and not shy away from the strangeness. And as we embrace, or maybe better, are embraced by the life in the Spirit, we end up becoming signposts of the kingdom of God.

[28 : 00] We become images of new creation. We become lights in this dark world. It might be strange now, but it's only a matter of time when this strangeness becomes the new normal in the age to come.

I want to end with a prayer of St. Francis. It's a little prayer actually in the back of the Book of Common Prayer. And it's a prayer that helps us pray about cultivating the life in the Spirit. So let's pray together. Lord, make us an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy. O divine master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love.

[29 : 07] For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen. Let's pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.