

Wind and Fire

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[0 : 00] Welcome again. My name is Thomas, one of the pastors here.! Delighted to welcome all of you, especially if you're new or visiting.

! This is a special Sunday, as we've been saying. It's Pentecost. It's the birthday of the church. We celebrate the birth of this movement that we're still a part of. But, you know, when we look at the beginning of this movement, the rise of Christianity, scholars widely agree, and these aren't just sort of Christian or Bible scholars.

These are historians, sociologists, people like Rodney Stark, before he was converted to Christianity. They widely agree that the rise of Christianity in the first three centuries dramatically altered the ancient world, dramatically changed the landscape.

The question is not whether it happened, it's how it happened. What made it possible? How did a small, with all due respect, socially unimpressive movement made up largely of the poor, of former slaves, people without power, how did a tiny little movement made up of people like that spread across all races, all classes, all nations, until even the Roman Empire couldn't ignore it, until even emperors who were persecuting Christians reluctantly had to admit that Christians were the only ones holding the fabric of society together as the late Roman Empire crumbled?

How is such a thing possible? And the answer that we're going to look at this morning is quite simple and yet unfathomably deep. The answer, of course, is the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 35] It's the only possible explanation. So, this morning, we're fortunate enough to have a historic record written by a physician and historian named Luke, and he gives us an eyewitness account of the moment the Holy Spirit was poured out on God's people and the church was born.

So, we're going to look at this event, which we refer to now as Pentecost, and we're going to consider the meaning of Pentecost for us as we look back 2,000 years later. The meaning is this. The meaning of Pentecost is that there is God's presence with us.

Pentecost means God's power through us, and Pentecost, of course, reveals God's purposes for us. So, let's pray, ask God to guide us, and then we're going to open His Word together.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the joy it brings. We thank You for the comfort it brings and also the challenge. We pray that as we open Your Word, Lord, that Your Spirit would open our hearts, that as we consider the written Word, we would come face to face with the living Word.

And, of course, we pray all of this through the power of the Holy Spirit. And it's in the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. So, the first thing we want to consider as we think about Pentecost is the presence of God.

[2 : 50] What does Pentecost have to say about the presence of God? The word Pentecost simply is a reference to 50th. It's the 50th day since the Passover.

It was one of the big three Jewish festivals. And Pentecost is happening here in the first century. And Jesus' disciples, it says, are all gathered together in one place.

This isn't just the 12. This is commonly understood to be all of Jesus' disciples, which is about 120. So, at this point, we have about 120 disciples, men and women, and they're all gathered together. And we know from the previous chapter that they are gathered together, and they're praying, and they're waiting. They're praying, and they're waiting. The reason that they're waiting is because Jesus told them to wait.

He made them a promise, and He said, I want you to wait until this promise is fulfilled. Before His crucifixion, Jesus, in John 14, if you want to read about this, Jesus says, don't be afraid.

[3 : 51] I'm not going to leave you and abandon you like orphans. I'm going to come back to you. And He says, in the meantime, I'm going to ask my Father, and my Father is going to send another

one to comfort you and help you.

He's going to send someone called the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is going to be in you and with you, and through the Holy Spirit, the Father and I are going to be with you and in you.

We're going to make our home with you. And then after His resurrection, Jesus appears to them again, and He reminds them of this promise in Acts chapter 1. He says, do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift that my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about, right?

Back in John 14. For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Now, at that time, they didn't understand much more about what this meant that we might, if this is our first time hearing it.

So, they're waiting, and they're praying, and then, lo and behold, everything changes. Luke says, and suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

[5 : 01] And He goes on to say, divided tongues of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them. So, all of a sudden, they're waiting and they're praying, and then wind and fire.

And in the Bible, in the Old Testament, wind and fire are markers, they're indicators of the presence of God. So, wind and fire come into this room.

The problem is, all throughout the Old Testament, the presence of God, although beautiful and mysterious, is also terrifying. It's dangerous. Some people learn the hard way that if you get too close to anywhere where God's presence dwells, you're likely to lose your life.

You're taking your life into your own hands. It's dangerous. It would be like us trying to draw near to the sun. We can't survive being anywhere near it.

And yet, somehow, at Pentecost, this holy God comes down again, and there is wind and there is fire, but this time the fire does not consume them.

[6 : 05] Now, that's a mystery, right? Because in the Old Testament, the reason that human beings couldn't get near God is because God is a holy God, and human beings are sinful. We've rebelled against God.

We're spiritually disconnected from God. And so, to try to come into the presence of a holy God, we can't survive that. But somehow, the fire comes to rest over each of these disciples, and it doesn't consume them.

And it raises this question, how is such a thing possible? And, of course, the answer is because Jesus has made them clean, because Jesus has made them holy, because the fire of judgment already fell on Christ on the cross.

And what that means is that this holy fire of God's presence is now able to rest on His people as a sign of mercy and power and blessing. So, Pentecost means that grace has cleansed us so completely that instead of fearing God's presence, we can actually be filled with God's presence. And it's hard for us to imagine how radical that would have been for these first century pious Jewish people. But this is the first great meaning of Pentecost.

[7 : 20] For those of us who follow Jesus, meaning we, at some point we came to Jesus, we said, we want to follow you, please forgive our sin, we want to turn from that, we want you to cleanse us and make us holy, we want to devote our lives to your word and your way.

So, for those of us who have done that, God is no longer an abstract idea. God is no longer a theological concept that we write about and study. God is not some distant being who may or may not be watching us from afar.

It means that the living, holy God is with us and even more radically in us. So, we're not meant to merely know things about God.

We're meant to know God himself. We're meant to experience God. Sometimes that comes with deep feeling. There have been times in this church, very recently, where we all sort of left saying that the Holy Spirit was moving and powerful and we're moved and we're emotional, right?

There are times, a recent worship gathering that Hillary and I were at with our diocese where there was this movement of the Holy Spirit and people are speaking in tongues and people are weeping and there's this powerful move of the Holy Spirit, right?

[8 : 37] And then other times, we experience God quietly, right? Through prayer, through worship, through a reading of Scripture, through receiving the sacraments.

And that experience is not this emotional high, it's more like the steady, warm embrace of a loving parent. It's the comfort that you would feel if you're a small child and you're in your room and it's

dark and you're scared and a parent comes in and they put their hand on your hand and they say, don't worry, I'm here.

And it doesn't make the darkness go away, but all of a sudden, it changes the darkness because you're not alone in it and you have this reassuring hand of your parents saying, I'm here and you're safe and it's okay and you're not alone.

So sometimes that's what it's like, right? And the reassurance of God's presence means that God is with us whether we feel it or not. That's the amazing thing, right?

So for us gathered here, for those of us who are Christians, let me ask you this. Is there anywhere in your life where you are living as though God has left you alone?

[9 : 40] Right? Where are we living as though we are alone? As though God isn't with us? And for those of us who desire to experience God's presence more, I'll tell you right now, there's no formula for that, strictly speaking.

Anybody who tells you there's a formula for that is trying to sell you something. There's no formula for that. But it is worth noting this, that these men and women did not have this powerful experience of the presence of God as the result of dynamic preaching, as the result of highly emotive worship music, as much as I personally love both of those things, they experienced the presence of God through prayer.

And friends, I don't know a single person in my life, any of my mentors, any of the people that I've looked up to, any of the people I know who regularly experience and encounter the presence of God, I don't know a single one of those people who does not also have a rich, consistent prayer life. Prayer is the vehicle into God's presence. It's through a prayer meeting that the church was born.

So it says in chapter 1, they were joining together constantly in prayer, is what it says.

So I would encourage you to do this. If you want to experience the presence of God, pray. Pray that God would meet you. Ask to experience His presence more in your daily life. And when you come to worship, like we've gathered this morning, come with expectancy, with a kind of openness to encountering the Lord here.

[11 : 09] And if you're someone who longs for the presence of God and you feel like you look back and lately you just haven't experienced it that much, and that's frustrating and discouraging, I love what Frederica Matthews Green says.

She's an Eastern Orthodox deep thinker, beautiful writer. And she says this. I think it's in her book, *The Jesus Prayer*. If you haven't read it, I would highly recommend it. But she says our hunger for God itself, if you're hungry for the presence of God, that itself is a sign that you have most likely already experienced.

God's presence. And she says it's like when you're walking through a mall. Remember back when we had shopping malls? You're walking through a mall. This is back in the 90s, which our kids think was when humanity peaked.

And then it was all downhill since the 90s. But back in the 90s, we had shopping malls and you'd be walking through and maybe you just ate lunch and you're not even hungry, but all of a sudden you catch this whiff of cinnamon. And you're like, where's that coming from?

And like that, you're all of a sudden hungry again. And you're going through, you know, looking, trying to find the Cinnabon place, right? And she says that's not something that you manufactured.

[12 : 14] You didn't whip that up out of your own kind of imagination. Like you were going along and all of a sudden, some particle of spice or sugar or butter made contact with your olfactory receptors, right?

And because of that contact, it awakened the hunger in you and you're like, I've got to have a cinnamon roll. And she says it's the same thing with God. If you're hungering for God, it's because somewhere along the way, you came in contact with Him.

You felt His presence and what you're wanting is more, which, amen, of course you should want more. So don't worry, if you're hungering for God's presence, it means you've already tasted it and there's more to be had.

So Pentecost is about God's presence, it's also about God's power. God's power. Jesus very clearly has given us a mission by us, I mean those of us who would consider ourselves Christians, part of the church.

He's given us a mission that by design we cannot accomplish on our own strength. He's given us an impossible mission. And in John 14, He tells His disciples something amazing.

[13:20] He essentially says, if you understand what He's saying in John chapter 14, we read a snippet of it, Hillary did a moment ago. He's essentially saying, the time is going to come when my ministry is going to pass to you.

In other words, I, Jesus says, I'm going to continue my ministry through my disciples, through you. But they cannot do this in their own strength.

You cannot continue the ministry of Jesus on earth with human effort alone. And that's why in Acts chapter 1, Jesus tells them to wait until the Spirit comes. He says in verse 8, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

And then after Pentecost, this amazing thing that we just read about, the ministry of Jesus continues through His people. So, if you continue reading the book of Acts, this account from Luke, you see Christians doing what?

They're preaching, they are healing, they're teaching, they're serving, they're giving generously of everything they have, they're evangelizing and sharing the gospel, and people are coming to faith, they're showing incredible mercy, they're casting out demons, they're starting new churches.

[14:28] We see this incredible explosive growth. And it's not that Jesus has stopped working and handed it off to the successors.

It's that Jesus is continuing to do His ministry, but through His Spirit-filled body. Paul, in the reading that we heard from 1 Corinthians 12, refers to the church as the body of Christ.

This is now His body doing His ministry in the world. Right? So, Jesus' power to bring healing and reconciliation and renewal to the world has now been distributed among all of God's people.

And this is what we refer to as spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts. Quick definition of spiritual gifts, the continued ministry of Jesus Christ in the world, through individual Christians, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That's what spiritual gifts really represent. So, think of sunlight. You know, sunlight, actually pure sunlight is white. It's white light. It contains all the colors of the rainbow. So, think of pure sunlight being refracted through a prism.

[15:41] And it's refracted into a brilliant array of hues. All the colors in the spectrum that we can see and in many that we can't see, right? Now, think of the spiritual gifts in the same way.

You have the sort of the pure ministry of Jesus that is refracted through the prism of the church. And then you have all of these hues, all of these various gifts, all these parts of the ministry of Jesus that are now shining through every individual Christian man and woman, right?

It's like a great prism. So, you have, instead of colors, you have all of these gifts. You have some people who are teaching in the way Christ would teach. You have some people showing the mercy of Christ or showing leadership or some people who have the ability to bring healing.

You have generosity. You have service. You have encouragement and administration and evangelism and prophecy. We have all of these gifts being refracted through the church.

So, every Christian has their own combination of gifts. Every Christian, when they use those gifts, reflects and shares in the ministry of Christ in some way.

[16:57] So, right, so what? For those of us who have repented and put our faith in Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit, which means you have spiritual gifts, which means you share in the ministry of Christ on earth right now.

Christ desires to work through you in all of these various ways. So, Jesus desires to work through some of you to deepen our understanding of God's Word.

And that's how He wants to work through you. Jesus is working right now through some of you to disciple and form the faith of our children and our youth.

So, when they're being disciplined by somebody like Tom or Camille or Anna or Lisa or Tim or Alex, right, that's Christ disciplining them, right, through those men and women, right?

Christ wants to bring physical and social and emotional and spiritual healing through some of you. You have a gift of healing. Christ wants to meet practical, tangible needs in our community through some of you.

[18:11] He wants to generate and steward resources for our church through some of you, right? So, the question is this. What gift has God given you that you may not currently be using?

What gift has God given you through the Holy Spirit that you may not even be aware of? Bill Bright, the guy who founded Campus Crusade, now called Cru, years ago, used to tell this story of a West Texas rancher named Yates.

And during the Depression, Yates was struggling to keep... He had a sheep ranch. And he was struggling to keep the ranch. He could barely pay the mortgage. His family was living on government assistance. It was kind of dire times for them.

And then an oil company asked permission to drill on his land. And right at just over 1,100 feet, this company strikes one of the largest oil reserves in the history of the country.

The first well they put in there produced 80,000 barrels today. I'm not an oil man, but that sounds like a lot to me. And... But here's the astonishing thing, and the reason I bring it up.

[19 : 21] Yates owned the mineral rights all along to that oil. It was always there, right? He had been a millionaire, multi-multi-millionaire, living in poverty because he didn't know what was right under his feet.

And the point is, I think there are a lot of Christians who are living the same way, right? I think a lot of Christians, you know, in Christ, we have been given the Holy Spirit. We have His presence, His gifts, His power, but I think we tend to live as though we are poor and powerless and alone. But it's right here, right? It's right here. Pentecost reminds us that God has already given His church everything we need. So why do we operate out of scarcity when there is such abundance to be enjoyed?

The question is whether we will be willing to receive His gifts and offer them for the good of the body or not. So one of the main goals this year, again, if you're part of our church, member, regular attender, maybe you're new and soon you will be a member, a regular attender, but anybody who's part of our church, one of the main goals is to see every member and regular attender come to a place where they know and they are actively using their gifts.

I think one of the biggest things that holds churches back is when that doesn't happen, right? And one of the best things that we can do as a church is to help you figure out what are your gifts, what is your share in the ministry of Christ and how do we open that up, right?

[20 : 51] How do we get that flowing so that everybody benefits? Because all these gifts, it says, are for the common good. They're for the good of the whole, right? So how does that happen? There are certain needs only you can meet.

There are certain roles only you can play. There are certain hands only you can hold. So Pentecost is about God's presence.

It is about God's power. But all this has a purpose. The purpose of the Holy Spirit, the purpose of the spiritual gifts, the purpose of that big oil reserve of spiritual power under our feet is to build up the church and bear witness to Christ.

And that is crystal clear if you read these passages that we just read. Jesus says in Acts chapter 1, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. Why? And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, right, where they are, and on all Judea and Samaria, the larger region, and to the ends of the earth.

It's a spiritual map of the mission of Christ. So God's mission is to spread the gospel through us to every tribe, tongue, and nation of people on earth.

[22 : 06] And it's beautiful how God gives us a preview of this at Pentecost. Right? See, as I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, Pentecost is one of the big three Jewish feasts where everybody would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

So you literally have Jewish pilgrims from every part of the known world all streaming into Jerusalem at this time of year. And so you have all of these people from kind of an international gathering of Jewish people all together in one place.

And it is no coincidence that the first public miracle of the Holy Spirit is that the gospel is heard in all of their languages. This shows that God's mission is not cultural domination.

God's mission does not take the shape of taking one culture, calling it superior, and imposing it on all of the other cultures. Right? God's mission is not cultural domination.

It is gospel translation. Right? It is the seeds of the gospel being planted in different cultures and places all around the world and then taking root and then growing up, reflecting all of the goodness and truth and beauty of those cultures and of those languages.

[23 : 18] So God's kingdom is by design multilingual. It is multi-ethnic. It's multicultural. So the gospel is meant to be planted in and redeem all of these various cultures.

I think it's a beautiful idea to think that the kingdom of God, the new Jerusalem, the new heavens and earth, it's going to be decorated and it's going to reflect the beauty of all of the various cultures

that have developed over the centuries.

The best of those things will be captured and redeemed and then put on display and it will enhance the joy and the beauty of that place. Right? So again, this is a big bold vision and like it or not, God intends to accomplish this through us.

And then in the Bible, as we often say, the church is God's plan A for the world, there is no plan B. This is it. It happens through very normal, ordinary, struggling people just like us.

This means, of course, if God wants to reach the world with the gospel, right, of course this means that we need to be raising up, sending out, and supporting missionaries to go to other parts of the world to share the gospel.

[24 : 28] We do this now. My hope and prayer is that in the years to come, we would greatly scale up and increase what we're able to do, sending out and supporting missionaries. Right?

Something I hope to see us do much more in the years to come. But do not make the mistake of thinking that it is limited to that, a few people being sent out as missionaries. If we're reading this correctly, we're all, everybody in this room, we're all called to be missionaries.

We're all actually full-time missionaries. It's just that most of us are called to be missionaries here. We're called to live out our mission here. Right? Through our relationships with our family and our friends and our neighbors.

Through the work that God has given many of us to do. Through the vocation that God has given you. You have access, many of you, I'm just kind of looking at various faces and I know what you do and I'm thinking, each of you has access to people and places and spheres of influence that most of us don't have access to.

God has opened certain doors and you've gone through those doors and now you're in that place where we can't be. And by we, I mean the church. Right? God has placed you there. It's not by accident. So, we all are called to participate in this mission, in the places where God has planted us.

[25 : 43] But we have to be willing to embrace it and live it out. We have to be willing to live for God's mission. Right? John Ortberg has this great image and I find myself coming back to it all the time. It's a little book.

I can't remember the name of the book but it's essentially a book called, I think, Our Shadow Mission. Shadow Mission. And that's the concept of the book is that he says, he talks about a shadow mission that every one of us has a God-given mission and then there's also the potential for a shadow mission.

A shadow mission is like a distorted version of the mission that God has for us. It's what happens when our true God-given mission gets hijacked by our desires, our wounds, unresolved trauma, ego, fear, insecurity, selfishness.

So for example, you may have a person who is called to lead but they drift into a shadow mission of needing control. Or you have a person who is called to serve but they drift into a shadow mission of needing to be needed.

Or a person who is called to proclaim and teach truth but they drift into a shadow mission of always needing to be right. Or the smartest person in the room.

[26 : 58] Or you have somebody who has a mission to build and grow the church to see more people come to faith and grow in their faith but they drift into a shadow mission of building a personal platform.

Right? So we see this all the time. And the point is this, the Holy Spirit gives the church power for God's mission. So we have the power that we need. We have everything that we need right here in this room.

But one of the great dangers for spirit-filled people is that we can take God's gifts and use them in service of our shadow mission. You can misuse these spiritual gifts.

And so instead of being motivated by love and obedience and humility and the kingdom of God we can allow ourselves to be derailed by self-protection and self-promotion and self-justification and self-importance.

And so a final question that I would want you to reflect on as we go our way today is this. Are you right now, to what extent do you feel like you are living in alignment with God's mission in your life?

[28 : 00] Or are there ways that you see yourself drifting toward more of a shadow mission version of that? Where you're using these God-given resources that you have in ways that serve self-promotion, self-justification, self-protection.

Right? I would say that all of us to some extent are always going to be struggling with that to some degree. So it's not like show of hands, you know, you're out. We're all, we're all dealing with that all the time.

This is one of the main reasons it is so vital to be part of a church community. Because you need people in your life who know you, who know your gifts, who know the power and the beauty when you're using your gifts to serve the Lord and can also detect when you're kind of veering off course and the kind of people who you have the relationship and the permissions have been given where they can pull you aside or you can pull them aside and say, I feel like you're kind of going off course here.

And where else are you going to find that? You're only going to find that in the church. This is why we need, I think on our own it's almost impossible to stay on course with God's mission for our lives. I think we're almost invariably going to go off course and pretty quickly.

So let me just pull all of this together. What does Pentecost mean for us? Right? Number one, it means God's presence with us.

[29 : 21] The holy God who once filled the tabernacle and the temple so that the priests could not even stand to worship who made the ground shake and the mountains tremble dwells inside you by the power of the Spirit.

Pentecost means God's power working through us. It means the ministry of Jesus Christ continues on earth through you right now.

And it means God's purpose is ever before us. The Spirit is given so that we might bear witness to Christ in our homes, in our jobs, among our neighbors, in the world, not only with our lips but with our lives.

So the invitation is this, let us not live as though God is far away or absent. Let us not live as though we are powerless. Let us not live as though our life has no purpose or mission because the Spirit has been poured out.

God is with us, Christ is working through us, and the church has been sent for the life of the world. Let's pray. Our Lord in heaven, we thank you and recognize immediately that these are things that, should they remain mere concepts, have no power to change us, much less anything else.

[30 : 46] And if there is anything to be reminded of, it is that we need your Holy Spirit. We need more of you. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in us. Lord, so we pray for your Spirit to fill us, to overflow, that all we do would be an overflow of your presence and your love in our lives.

We pray this for our community and we pray for the good of those who might come to know you through our common witness. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.