

A Better Pentecost

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 May 2018

Preacher: Matt Wilcoxon

- [0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. It's great to be with you. I come bearing warm Pentecost greetings from our rector, Dan Clare, at Church of the Resurrection and on behalf of the whole church, really.
- So it's a pleasure to be with you this morning as we celebrate Pentecost Sunday. We're going to be in that Acts chapter two passage. So if you have a Bible, turn there. Acts chapter two, verses one to twenty one.
- One of the most amazing things about Christianity is that there is a Christianity at all. It's astounding that this group of mostly poor, uneducated and marginalized people in a backwater Roman colony went on to change the course of world history.
- It's difficult to see how they could do it. So how did they do it? It's a question we especially might be interested in answering here in Washington, D.C.
- See, so many of us have come to this city with a fire in our belly. We want to change the world. We want to change the country. We want to do good. And yet before too long, we grow cynical. We realize we don't even have the power to change ourselves. We burn out.
- [1 : 2 0] If only we knew the secret, the power source of these early Christians. Well, this passage in Acts chapter two, it tells us that secret. It tells us the source of their power.
- And it is called Pentecost. It's what we celebrate today. What is Pentecost? Pentecost starts in the Old Testament, Leviticus chapter 23.
- It's first given there and it's not called Pentecost. It's called the Feast of Firstfruits, Shavuot. And every year as the harvest would start coming in, the people in this agrarian society, in this Jewish culture, would bring the first fruits of their harvest in the late spring and they would eat them before God as an offering of thanksgiving.
- But as they celebrated this year after year, the Jewish people noticed something. They noticed that the first fruits came about 50 days after Passover.
- And then they noticed something else. It wasn't lost on them that 50 days after Passover in the story of the Old Testament is when God gave Moses the law on Mount Sinai.
- [2 : 3 8] And so they started calling this feast Pentecost, which just means 50. Pentecost had this double meaning. First fruits and the giving of the divine law.
- And these things go together. Pentecost was a celebration of the power to flourish in the land and the power to flourish in God and to do those things together.
- So with that background in mind, I want you to notice what Luke says in Acts chapter 2 verse 1. This is how he starts. He says, when the day of Pentecost arrived.
- More literal rendition of that would be when the day of Pentecost had fully come. What he's saying is we are about to see the true Pentecost, the true power to flourish before God.
- We're going to see the fulfillment of this feast. See, in the Old Testament, Moses ascended to Mount Sinai and he received the law. And as Dan said, this made the people of Israel into a nation.

[3 : 45] So I want to look together at this passage in Acts. I want to show you three ways that the Spirit works his power in our lives. Number one, he brings us into the presence of God. Two, he gathers us together across boundaries.

And three, he sends us out on mission. Before we get into it, let me pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

Oh, Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Send your spirit upon our flesh and make us alive as we hear your word. In Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. Here's the first thing the Spirit does. I want you to see. The Holy Spirit brings you into the presence of God.

He brings you an experience of transcendent meaning. He fills your life with awe and wonder and repentance. Some of the great modern thinkers like Freud and Marx and Nietzsche predicted that as humanity would progress and become more scientific, that we would outgrow the need for religion, that we would cease longing for transcendence.

[5 : 00] Nothing could have been further from the truth. This week I heard an interview with the author Michael Pollan. He said he's always been a committed philosophical materialist, very scientifically minded, skeptical.

And yet he realized that this left him unable to confront some of the most basic questions in his life. Facing meaning and mortality.

He says he was trapped in negative self-talk. He was trapped in himself, unable to break out of the stories he tells himself. And he wanted to overcome these things and discover a sense of awe in the world again.

So what did he do? He's written this book. He started looking into the potential of psychedelic drugs to help him do that. He talks about going on a trip where he sees that each of the plants in his garden has a spirit.

Or another one where he's trapped inside of his laptop. He seems to know what he's seeing is an illusion. And yet he says he finds it therapeutic.

[6 : 12] He needs it. And I mention him because he's emblematic of the conundrum of modernity. And so many people in our culture, we say there's nothing transcendent.

And yet we're seeking it everywhere. We're seeking Pentecost. An encounter with the living God. We just don't know it. Look at what happens on Pentecost as the earliest disciples gather in prayer and wait for the promised Holy Spirit.

It's there in verses 2 and 3. There's something ineffable that happens. Luke says he almost can't describe it.

He says it's something like a mighty rushing wind. It's something like fiery flames. What's going on here? Wind and fire are telltale signs of the presence of God in the Bible.

Think of Job in the Old Testament. God comes and he speaks to him from the whirlwind. Think of Moses as he encounters God for the first time in the desert.

[7 : 24] In a fiery bush. A shrub. Or think of that first Pentecost on Mount Sinai. When God comes down, he comes in a windstorm and fire.

And every time he does so, he radically changes things. He frees people. He brings liberation. People fall down before him in reverent worship.

They experience transcendence. They're broken out of themselves. And that's what's happening here in Acts 2. The Spirit is the living God coming down to dwell with and in his people in a new way.

He's a consuming fire. He's a powerful force. He changes things. See, God is not just some idea.

This is what Pentecost tells us. God is not some idea. Christianity is not a philosophy about life. It is real encounter with God through the person of the Holy Spirit.

[8 : 28] And you see this in the lives of these first followers of Jesus. They are put in motion. They cannot help but to speak and to praise God. And to live a life of worship.

They're energized in a way that, as we'll see, it overflows into their lives, into their city and the world. Wind and fire. Now, does this mean that you're not really experiencing the presence of God if you're not experiencing wind and fire?

Does being filled with the Holy Spirit really mean something this strange and radical is what happens here? Yes and no. Yes, being filled with the Spirit should bring wind and fire.

It should have a real effect on your life. As he comes close to us and he fills us, we will tremble before God. We will fall down before Jesus with this biblical mix of fear and love and wonder.

We will hate our sin. So yes, there should be wind and fire. And we should seek that. But in another sense, no.

[9 : 42] We shouldn't focus on the pyrotechnics. See, in this story, God is kicking off a new age. He's breaking down the door between heaven and earth.

It's a coming out party for the Holy Spirit. But if you go on and you read through the book of Acts and through Paul's epistles, you'll see other instances of people being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes there's pyrotechnics. And sometimes there isn't. But what is always the case is that it always produces the same effects of awe-filled, repentant, and empowered worship of Jesus.

New life. I think we need to make sure we avoid two temptations with regard to the Holy Spirit.

One I would think of as more the reformed temptation. For those of you from a Protestant background. And that is that we are tempted to tell the Spirit how He can't show up.

[10 : 52] That He can't do certain things. That what He does must fit in the box of what we understand. It can't be too weird or unexplainable. That's one error we want to avoid.

But we also want to avoid this other error. Call it a charismatic error. And that's that we tell the Spirit how He has to show up. That if certain pyrotechnics aren't present, that we aren't experiencing the Holy Spirit.

No, what we want to do is we want to be genuinely open to the Holy Spirit. Because He's not an inert force. He's a person. We want to seek His filling.

Knowing that He will come with His fiery presence. And fill us with worship. And transform us. That's the first thing the Holy Spirit does. He brings us into the presence of God. A transformative experiential relationship with God.

And it's always oriented towards Jesus. Towards the gospel. Here's the second thing. He gathers us together in difference.

[11 : 59] He unites us to Jesus. And therefore to one another. He breaks down barriers. And He brings genuine reconciliation. Notice what happens in verses 5 to 11.

There are pious Jews and Jewish converts gathered from all over the world, Luke tells us. Many of these people would have made a once in a lifetime pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

They would have stayed for both Passover and the Feast of Pentecost. And they speak Greek, most of them. But they also bring with them their native languages. And look what happens as the Holy Spirit comes upon these Galilean disciples who are gathered in Jerusalem.

They go out into the city and they proclaim the praises of God in those native tongues. It's a miracle. But I want you to see what I think is Luke's bigger point here.

And that is found in verses 9 to 11. And Luke goes out of his way to tell us where these pilgrims had come from. He gives us a list. Places, some of which we know and others we may have never heard of.

[13 : 16] Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt. Parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome.

Everyone's here. And if you look closely at this list, Bible scholars tell us that it is an updated version of the first list of nations in the Bible in Genesis chapter 10.

And if you know the story in Genesis, the nations are listed and then we come right to the story of the Tower of Babel. Where all the nations come together and then God scatters them.

What's happening here? Why is Luke doing this? In the story of Babel, as the people come together to build a tower to heaven, what they're doing is they're trying to create a homogenous empire.

To achieve unity through the force of sameness. And the only way they can see to protect themselves from fragmentation is to abolish difference.

[14 : 23] They want to overcome the effects of sin through brute force. It's idolatry. It's a false and idolatrous unity. And God descends upon them in punishment to divide them and to divide their languages and to send them out.

It's a punishment that's also mercy. So we're seeing in some sense here the reversal of that. But notice the difference.

God descends here on the people not to divide them. But to unite them. And it's a true unity. Because this unity that the Spirit brings doesn't abolish difference.

It's rooted in the transcendent God. And it's a unity that can tolerate and even celebrate difference. It's a unity of grace. God doesn't abolish harmony here.

He brings it. He doesn't abolish difference. He brings it into harmony. Think about this. The first worship service that we're witnessing here. It's the first worship service of the new age. What language is it in?

[15 : 29] It's in all of them. God is breaking down barriers and bringing unity that can tolerate and even celebrate difference.

What does this mean for us? How does the Holy Spirit break down barriers among us? Our natural tendency is to fragment. We seek naturally to be around people who are like us.

We form tribes. When there's difference, we want to fix it by making other people more like us. Getting them to see things exactly the way we do.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to us as the church to overcome that tendency. When we come into the presence of God who transcends all of us and all of our cultures, we see that we're all in the wrong before God.

Before a holy God. But we also see that we are all recipients of His grace. That all of our individuality and our cultures can be pointers to a different aspect of who God is.

[16 : 41] When Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit, broken out of themselves in a transcendent life of Christianity, their sense of nationalism starts to erode.

Their natural tendency towards racism or classism, it starts to fall away. It's all relativized by the gospel. Barriers are broken down.

This is one of the hallmarks of revival. When it comes upon us, when the Spirit comes and does a new work, we see this change happening in ourselves and in our church.

As you here well know, our national motto is, E Pluribus Unum. From the many one. I was thinking about that this week.

It's a great ideal, but the history of our nation so often belies it. Slavery, racism, identity politics. Try as we may through laws and slogans and awareness campaigns.

[17 : 49] We cannot exercise these demons from ourselves without a work of the Holy Spirit of God coming upon the church and bringing revival. So the Spirit gathers us together in difference.

He brings true unity in diversity. He overcomes barriers. That's the second thing. There's one more. The Holy Spirit sends us out on mission.

He equips us for good works that anticipate new creation. He brings about through us the first fruits of His kingdom harvest.

He sends us out. Just because of time and attention spans, we only read through verse 21 this morning. But really this passage, this story of Pentecost goes all the way through verse 41.

And you see that the result that the Spirit's filling aims at, the outcome of it, as people are brought into the presence of God and united across barriers, is this long sermon that Peter gives.

[19 : 00] Peter preaches a sermon about Jesus. And it starts in our passage with him quoting from the book of Joel. And he says, And in the last days it shall be.

God declares that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. And your young men shall see visions. And your old men shall dream dreams. And then he closes in verse 21.

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. As Peter preaches this sermon to the outside world, that new creation is a possibility.

He goes out with a message. He tells them that they too can call on the name of the Lord and be saved. He tells them the last days have come when God is renewing the world.

You see here, as the Spirit comes through Peter, the people are impelled to mission, to a message, to proclamation about new creation. The Spirit sends them out.

[20 : 04] And we see at the end of the passage, which we didn't read, there's a great harvest of first fruits. Now, if you read this passage in just a simplistic way, you might think the Holy Spirit's only interested in preaching and evangelism.

And that's an error we might fall into. We think the Spirit's only interested in these things that happen in church. And it's true that the kingdom of God advances through a powerful message of proclamation that the Christian life and the church can never be divorced from the proclamation of God's Word.

But that doesn't mean that we all have our role in the harvest as preachers. Peter's functioning here as a representative of the mission of the church. This story is showing us that the goal that the Spirit is working towards is to manifest new creation and to bring it into reality in the world.

The message is important, but the Spirit manifests new creation in a myriad of ways. There are, throughout Paul's epistles, several lists of gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 12, we see a list. In 1 Corinthians 12, in Ephesians 4, the Spirit is mentioned. And Paul talks about the different ways in which He works.

[21 : 25] There are gifts ranging from prophecy and speaking to generosity and showing mercy and even administration. Even administration, Deborah and Liz.

But here's the thing to notice too. None of the lists in the Bible are the same. They've got different things. They seem to overlap and to have things that don't match up.

And I think what we're supposed to see is not that we somehow can make a comprehensive list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the way that He works and empowers us in our lives. We're supposed to see that there is no comprehensive list.

We're supposed to see that the Spirit provides innumerable empowerments or gifts or charismata to the people of God so that they can manifest creation.

Not only in the context of church activities, but manifest new creation in every area of their lives. Let me tell you what this means.

[22 : 30] This means the Holy Spirit comes into your life to transform the ordinary. To transform what you think of as ordinary. That He wants to be working through you in the mundane.

Accomplishing little works of new creation wherever God has placed you. Martin Luther put it this way. All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in struggle, in government.

To what does it all amount before God? Except child's play. By means of which God is pleased to give His gifts in the field, at home, and everywhere.

These are the masks of the Lord our God, behind which He wants to be hidden and to do all things. What He's saying is all the tasks that we face, many of which are not chosen upon us, but press themselves on us, that they can be masks of God.

Places where we partner with God in manifesting something of new creation. And the way we enter into that reality each day is by being filled with the Spirit.

[23 : 40] seeking His vision and His empowerment for our daily lives. This is easy for some of you who have jobs that you feel are important, that you love.

But what about those of us who are struggling to find employment, or have jobs that we hate, or are cynical? I hope this is especially encouraging to you to seek the filling of the Spirit, to let the ordinary and the mundane be transformed.

As God comes in and shows you, gives you a vision for how some, in some way you can be part of manifesting new creation, where He's put you now. It doesn't matter if you're a lawyer, or a janitor, a nanny.

God wants to do good works through you. He sends us out on mission. He equips us for work that anticipates new creation. He brings about the first fruits of that coming kingdom through the things we do each day as we walk in the Spirit.

So that's what the Spirit wants to do. That's the power He has to bring us into the presence of God, to gather us together and to send us out. There might be someone here who is a seeker, someone who desperately realizes they need transcendent meaning in their lives.

[25 : 08] If you're here, you're wondering, well, what should I do? They asked Peter that when he preached his sermon. And I'll leave you Peter's answer. He says, repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the promise Holy Spirit, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If that's you, I know that Dan, Victor, Deborah, one of the pastors or leaders here would love to talk to you about next steps in knowing Christ and finding out what life is really about.

If you're a Christian, good news, you have been baptized in the Spirit. That happened when you became a believer. As you were baptized with water, the Spirit comes into your life.

But now you need to seek to be filled again and again, constantly seeking a fresh filling and empowerment from Him. And the way to be filled is to empty yourself.

Every time as you're looking throughout Scripture and people are filled with the Holy Spirit, it seems to be in the context of them coming to God in prayer and asking for it. And Jesus tells us if we ask for the Holy Spirit, God our Father will not, not ignore that prayer.

[26 : 29] So our posture needs to be like that of the first Christians to seek the filling of the Spirit, to ask for it. As we prepare to come to the table now, let's pray.

Let's pray that God fills us with His Holy Spirit and makes the Gospel more real to us and brings a new power into our lives this Pentecost. Will you bow and pray with me?

Come, Holy Spirit, Creator, come from Thy bright heavenly throne.

Come, take possession of our souls and make them all Thine own. Lord, bring us into Your presence in new and powerful ways.

Break us out and liberate us from ourselves and the stories we tell ourselves. Give us joy and delight in Your presence. Bring us together, humble us before You and unite us across differences.

[27 : 34] We pray for the unity of the church this day, that You would make us one as Jesus is one. And Lord, we ask that You would send us out on mission, give us wisdom and discernment in the places You've called us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.