

Pentecost 2024 (Acts 2:1-38 and John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15)

Jesus has died, risen from the tomb, spent weeks with his disciples and possibly others, and just before he ascended into heaven, he told his disciples to wait for the Spirit to descend upon them. Our reading from Acts this morning describes the receiving of the Holy Spirit, and how the disciples employ what they have received.

Let's think about a Bible story you may have learned as a child. The tower of Babel is found in Genesis 11 and describes how mankind wanted to be greater than God. After the flood God instructed Noah to multiply and fill the earth. Noah's descendants wanted nothing more than to stay where they were located and not scatter across the earth. In response and defiance of God's instruction they began to build a huge tower that would reach into the clouds. On top of this tower they planned on building a city which would keep them located in one specific point. It was to be a permanent and impressive city built by proud men. God knew what was taking place in their hearts and minds and divided their single language into multiple languages. For the first time in history people couldn't understand what other people were saying and the idea for a grand city was abandoned. Small groups of people who spoke the same language gathered together and moved into different parts of the country and world.

Contrast that with the Day of Pentecost. The believers were all together waiting for power and direction when a violent wind whipped through the entire house in which they were gathered. It was not a gentle breeze, not at all a comfortable, cooling breath of fresh air, but violent... think like a tornado! This wind introduced the presence of the Holy Spirit. Divided tongues, as of fire, rested upon each of them. These strange phenomena of tongues like fire reversed, at least for a time, the language barriers of that part of the world.

People tried to explain away the strange experiences by calling the disciples drunks. Dr. Halford Luccock, a famous pastor in New York, was asked by a friend of his who was a New York policeman what the "D.D." printed after his name meant. He informed the officer that it meant "Doctor of Divinity." The policeman replied: "Do you know that 'D.D.' is the most common charge written on the police blotter? It means "Drunk and Disorderly." Dr. Luccock assured his friend that was only a coincidence. But on his way home, he began to think about it. After all, the saints at Pentecost were accused of being drunk. When the spirit came upon them it was a phenomenon so unique, so dramatic that no one was left unmoved. There appeared to be tongues of fire resting on each one of them. There was no human involvement that could be repeated whenever a person chose, it was an act of God that started breaking down barriers that humans had erected.

The book of Acts carries through the theme that nothing can limit or restrict the scope of the gospel, not even the old Babel language barriers! The Holy Spirit can and will break open chains and prisons and barriers. The power of the Resurrection had come to the church through the Holy Spirit and God was announcing in this special event that the confusion of Babel could be brought to an end through people who wait upon the Lord and are filled with the Spirit.

God has given his people the task of proclaiming the meaning and significance of God acting in the world. Peter calls the people who are in Jerusalem to listen to what he has to say, assuring them that he is not drunk at 9 in the morning. He reminds them of the day of the Lord as foretold by the prophet Joel proclaiming that one day God's sons and daughters would experience the power of the Spirit. The second part of Peter's sermon that we did not hear in today's reading from Acts reminds us that the experience of the Spirit is directly linked to the ministry of Jesus and that his death and resurrection was part of God's plan for saving the world. His sermon ends by proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus is the basis for proclaiming Jesus as the Savior of the world. Pentecost is a reminder that the Spirit gave the power to proclaim Jesus and to spread Christianity.

Even though the Spirit was present in the Old Testament there was little said about the Spirit's interaction with people. The same Spirit that came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost was the Spirit that breathed life into Adam, and occasionally the Spirit would empower selected people to be heroes and heroines of Israel. In our gospel reading from John today, when Jesus spoke of the Counselor, his name for the Holy Spirit, it was a new teaching, a new relationship with the Counselor. The Counselor had been with the people of God and would be in them. Jesus gave some basic truths about the Holy Spirit before he went to the cross.

The first thing Jesus told the disciples is there was no need to fear the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is sent by Jesus and comes from God, going along beside the believer. The ministry of the Spirit should be joyously embraced in our lives. The Spirit is the beginning of the promise that God, who has begun a good work in you, will complete it.

The Holy Spirit isn't self-centered; the only purpose of the Spirit is to draw us into paying attention to Jesus, just as our lives are to be lived in a way that will point others to Christ. However, we cannot force anyone into believing, it isn't in our power to convince a person to believe. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who draws people to Christ. It is the Spirit who convicts us of our need for repentance and forgiveness.

The Spirit guides us. Whether it shows or not, every pastor depends on the Holy Spirit in the pulpit. I say 'whether it shows or not' because the Holy Spirit is working with a very imperfect instrument when he tries to speak through a minister. I am reminded of the story of a small girl watching her clergyman father preparing next Sunday's sermon. "Daddy," she asked, "does God tell you what to say?" "Yes, he does, dear," he replied, "Why?" "I was wondering," she said, "why you cross so much of it out."

There is also that time-honored story of the pastor who stood before his congregation and confessed, "This week has been a very busy one for me. I did not have time to prepare today's message. I guess I will have to depend on the Holy Spirit. Next week I hope to do better."

I depend on the Holy Spirit when I am preparing and delivering a message, but the Holy Spirit is also working within you as you listen. That is our hope so that even when I stumble and falter you can still receive a blessing not because you have heard my voice, but because somehow you have heard that still, small voice of God within.

Some of us know about the comforting power of the Holy Spirit. We have walked through life's dark valleys; we have struggled with doubt and despair. We have experienced almost unbearable physical and mental pain and through the power of the Holy Spirit we survive.

A prominent businessman in South Africa ordered a Rolls Royce car, with which he was immensely impressed. One day he went to the car dealer and asked him what its horsepower was. The dealer said that the Rolls Royce company never stated the horsepower of their engines. The businessman specifically asked the dealer to find out. Because the man was an important customer, the dealer sent a long cable to the Rolls Royce works in Derby, England, setting out the exact specifications of the engine, asking them to cable immediately the exact horsepower. Shortly the reply arrived, bearing one word: Adequate.

Some of us have come to the end of our rope with very little strength to carry on and have found God's strength was adequate for whatever need we had at that time. As St. Paul writes to the Philippians: "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (4:19) Adequate is hardly the word for that. God is able to do far more than we could ever ask.

How many times in life will we say, "I don't believe I can stand the pressure any longer?" But we do. In fact we cope with our head held high, our faith enhanced, our wisdom increased and our determination made stronger. How? It was because there was within us a corresponding inner force that was more than adequate to meet any outer pressure that the world might send. That is the Holy Spirit within.

God is present with us for guidance, for comfort and strength. I do not want you to think of the strength that the Holy Spirit gives to be the equivalent of the comfort about which we just spoke. We are not talking about strength just to hang on. We are talking about strength to go out and fight the evil in this world.

In 1953, the football team at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, had an undefeated season. The star halfback on the team weighed less than 160 pounds. But he had learned a secret that more than made up for his small stature--and proved devastating to the opposition. Someone asked the coach what made his star halfback so good. This is what he answered: "He has speed, of course. But that's not the whole of it--there are others as fast as he is. His real secret is the way he follows his interference. He has an uncanny knack for sensing just when the hole will open up, just where the key block will be thrown. He knows where the flow of power is going, and he goes with it." The wisest man or woman in the world today is the one who can see where the Holy Spirit is working--who knows where the flow of power is going, and goes with it.

The Spirit is the third person of God, the one who connects us to God by bringing God's truth to the forefront of our mind. The Spirit is the one who prompts us to ask the question, "Does this glorify Jesus?" The ministry of the Spirit allows us to live in the power of God.

All glory be to God.