

“The Coming of the Spirit”
Acts 2:1-24
April 27, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

We’re looking today at the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It was one of three harvest festivals on the ancient Jewish calendar every year. The winter grains began to be harvested right after Passover, and the harvests were usually completed within fifty days. The name *Pentecost* means fiftieth, because it was a Jewish festival that occurred 50 days after Passover in celebration of this harvest. Pentecost Sunday has been put on the Christian calendar 7 weeks after Easter Sunday. So since Easter Sunday changes every year in the western church, Pentecost takes place at a different time each year. This year, Pentecost Sunday occurs just two weeks from today, on May 11.

The name of this day, Pentecost, has been taken up and used as an adjective, pentecostal, to describe Christians who believe that tongues-speaking is the normal evidence of the filling of God’s Spirit. The internet encyclopedia *Wikipedia* lists 110 different denominations that would be considered pentecostal in their beliefs. The Presbyterian Church in America, our denomination, does not appear on that list. Many Presbyterians don’t much like talking about the Holy Spirit. But we should. Jesus certainly did. Over and over again prior to his death and then again after his resurrection, he promised his disciples that he would give the Holy Spirit to them after his departure. Acts 2 is the fulfillment of that promise. A revered theologian to Presbyterians, John Calvin, spoke so much about the Holy Spirit that some have called him the theologian of the Holy Spirit.

As we look today at the giving of the Holy Spirit, I would like for us to look at the two sections Luke includes in this passage. He talks first about the three signs that accompany the giving of the Spirit, and then outlines for us a Spirit-filled sermon preached by Peter, together with its results.

I. The Spirit Comes with Signs – vs. 1-13

There are three supernatural signs, three miracles that are given to attest to the fact that this is from God. Just as Jesus, the second member of the Trinity came with a miracle, the virgin birth, so the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, also comes miraculously. The three signs were a sound, a sight, and some strange speech.

The sound was like the blowing of a violent wind. This was not a gentle breeze, but **“a mighty rushing wind”** (v. 2). There are several ways the Spirit

is like the wind. First, both are powerful. Those of us who have lived in Alabama for any time at all have seen the power of the wind in the tornados that sometimes touch down in our area. I remember one such tornado during our first year here in Birmingham. I believe it was 1994 when a tornado cut a swath through the area along Highway 119. A large two-story house in our neighborhood was picked up and moved from its foundation. In the previous chapter, Jesus had linked the Spirit with the idea of power. **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”** (1:8). Like the disciples, we need this power. The task of worldwide witness is great, and we are weak. But the Spirit is the great leveler, bringing more than enough power to accomplish the task. The wind is also invisible, also like the Spirit. But both the Spirit and the wind leave very visible effects in their wake. The wind is unable to be controlled by any man, also like the Spirit.

Not only is the Spirit about power, but also about purity. That’s what’s conveyed by the image of the tongues of fire. Whenever the Spirit of God comes in power, he brings with him a deep sense of the holiness of God, by which our own holiness appears deeply stained. He brings purity to God’s people.

It is the third sign, though, that Luke emphasizes. All the disciples **“were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance”** (v. 4). This was clearly a miracle of speaking, not of hearing, as some have suggested. The Galileans who were speaking in tongues had a reputation of being uncultured and not even able to speak their own language very well. According to one commentator, they “had difficulty pronouncing gutturals and had the habit of swallowing syllables when speaking.” But here they are speaking the various languages represented by their hearers. We need to understand who these hearers are. They are Jewish pilgrims who have come from all over the Roman world to be in Jerusalem for Passover and Pentecost. You may remember from reading the Old Testament that for several centuries the Jews had been spread throughout the world through various foreign occupations of their land. But they still maintained their Jewish identity, and many wanted to make at least one trip to their homeland during their lifetime. They would come for Passover and stay at least through Pentecost. So these hearers, even though they were Jewish, were native to other lands.

The symbolism is hard to miss. God is giving a very clear demonstration that this age of the Spirit is one in which all the nations are included in the blessing of God. Luke carefully records all the nations represented here. They span the entire Roman world, from its easternmost boundary to west of Rome itself. The descendents of all three of Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, are also represented here. God’s work is spilling out beyond the boundaries of one people group, the Jews, and extending to the entire world. Note the language utilized in the Joel prophesy Peter uses in his sermon. God says, **“I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh”** (v. 17). The image is of a heavy tropical

rainstorm, and illustrates the abundance of God's gift of the Spirit. It's not just a drizzle, but an emptying of the heavens that drenches everything on the earth. The Spirit comes to all the earth, not just one nation.

It has been pointed out by many that this gift of tongues brought by the Spirit is the reversal of the judgment of God at the Tower of Babel. You will remember that God divided languages at Babel, so that mankind would not be able to unite in their opposition to God. It was a judgment of mercy, designed to limit the human capacity for evil. But that is now reversed, and all languages and people groups find their unity in the gospel. That is still the case today. True and deep unity between any group of people, whether it be in a marriage, a church, a nation or the world, comes as the Holy Spirit brings us to believe in the gospel. It is the end of the sense of cultural superiority that brings enmity and warfare between people. John Stott draws out this contrast between Babel and Pentecost when he says, "At Babel, earth proudly tried to ascend to heaven, whereas in Jerusalem heaven humbly descended to earth."

This Pentecost event provided the Apostles, and all of us as well, with a clear demonstration of God's worldwide concern. At the end of this day, the very first day in the age of the Spirit, there were 3000 converts from many nations. The church became worldwide in scope on Day 1.

II. The Spirit Speaks Through Peter – vs. 14-24

One of the ways the book of Acts is such a gift to us is the way Luke records some of the early sermons of the church. There are nineteen significant Christian speeches recorded in this book, and Peter's sermon in this chapter is the first of them. Luke records these apostolic sermons because he intends that we take instruction from this Spirit-filled, apostolic preaching. Their preaching changed the world, and so can ours if we will learn from them and seek the Spirit's power in our proclamation of the gospel.

By his own admission, Luke didn't record these sermons word-for-word. He says in verse 40, "**And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them.**" These are summaries. So we don't preach by memorizing them and repeating them word-for-word. Some would not mind that, because it would make for short sermons. I timed Peter's sermon here, and it took me exactly three minutes and ten seconds to read it. So our use of these sermons should be to look for the transferable principles that we can make part of the preaching we do in our time, place and culture.

I want to point out two such principles from this sermon of Peter's. I have been greatly helped in this by a book written by Jerram Barrs of Covenant Theological Seminary. The book is called *The Heart of Evangelism* and contains 7 principles for evangelism that I have found quite helpful. I want to point out

two of them that very clearly appear in Peter's sermon. The two are to build bridges for the gospel and to challenge the heart and mind.

Peter builds a bridge for the gospel by his quotation from Joel 2. To build a bridge means that we find something in the hearer that is right, something that we can affirm as a good gift from God. As Christians, we often approach people with the first thought of discerning what is wrong with them and figuring out how we can convince them to look to God for changing what is wrong. So we encounter someone who is very critical of Christians, and our first instinct is to defend Christianity against their attacks. The problem is that you can't do that without telling them that they're wrong. Notice how Peter approaches his hearers. They too had done something very wrong. They had crucified Jesus. That's what Peter says in verse 23: **“this Jesus... you crucified.”** He's not just engaging in some preacher hyperbole. Remember that his audience consists of the Jewish pilgrims who had come from all over the world for Passover and Pentecost. This same crowd was in Jerusalem on that day fifty days before this when Pilate, trying to release Jesus after finding no fault in him, presented him to the crowd with the offer of releasing him. But they preferred the release of a notorious prisoner named Barabbas. **“Pilate said to them, ‘Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?’ They all said, ‘Let him be crucified!’”** (Matt. 27:22). This sin of calling for Jesus' crucifixion would definitely have to be addressed, but it wasn't the first thing Peter did. He began with an affirmation of their commitment to the Scriptures. He quoted from the prophet Joel, assuming that they accepted Joel's prophetic authority. As good Jews, they did in fact accept the authority of the Old Testament. In making this affirmation, he was building a bridge to them.

The principle, then, is our need to build bridges with people by making our initial focus that which is right in the other person, which is God's gift to them by his common grace. For example, Jerram Barrs describes a non-Christian man he knew who was always speaking cynically about Christianity. But Dr. Barrs had noticed about him that he deeply cared for his children and grandchildren. So he said to him one day, “I'm not buying your cynical attitude, because when I see your deep love for your wife, your children and your grandchildren, I don't see cynicism.” Jerram Barrs reported that this affirmation completely changed their future discussions. The man became willing to discuss spiritual things without his former negative, ridiculing attitude. I have found the same thing to be true in my conversations with unbelievers. Building bridges is not just a manipulative tactic to be employed. It is part of the respect God asks us to show to others, finding an area of their life where God has been good to them. It could include things like a faithful marriage, a good work ethic, a love for the poor and weak, a strong commitment to honesty and integrity, being punctual, and many other things.

Peter didn't stop there, and the second principle we see here is a willingness to challenge the heart and the mind. Peter's hearers had called for

the crucifixion of Jesus, and they must be challenged on that fact if they were to come to repent and believe the gospel. The faithful proclamation of the gospel must always include this element of challenge because it is the nature of sinners to disobey and rebel. The most devastating kind of challenge is when we see that the thing in which we have taken the most pride is the very thing we use against God. In the case of Peter's hearers, it was their pride in the Messiah. The hope of the Messiah was the basis on which these Jews believed themselves superior to all the other nations. The Old Testament was clear in saying that God's Messiah would be Jewish, a son of Abraham and a son of David. He would rule the world with an everlasting reign. So Peter's challenge was utterly devastating. He lays out his case that Jesus of Nazareth was the Jewish Messiah. He had been the author of numerous miracles, signs and wonders, which no one disputed. These were done to attest to his authenticity as the Messiah. But even more significant, he had been raised from the dead by God, in fulfillment of the Old Testament. Further, he was the author of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit now being witnessed. This is the one about whom they had shouted to Pilate just fifty days prior, **"Let him be crucified!"** Their eyes were open as Peter made his case, and **"they were cut to the heart"** (v. 37) in conviction. In their desperation, they asked Peter what they could do. He told them to throw themselves upon the mercy of God. They should repent of their sins, accept baptism in the name of Christ, and receive God's promise of the forgiveness of their sins.

The gospel comes to us with the same challenge. The greatest area of sin is usually seen in the greatest gifts God gives to a culture or people. God's greatest gift to Israel was in having the Messiah of the world come through them. This was precisely where they got into trouble as they used this gift selfishly, to make themselves superior to others. What about our culture? Where are our greatest gifts that we use selfishly, using them even to gain independence from God? Americans have been given a great gift of freedom from God. Yet we use this freedom selfishly. We do only what we want to do, regardless of its effects upon others. We have used God's gifts against God, just like Peter's hearers.

CONCLUSION:

As we come to the Lord's Table, we are called to do this in remembrance of Jesus. We must be called to a remembrance of Jesus because we so easily forget the one who will never forget us. Remember him today, his sacrifice for you that provides the forgiveness we all need just as desperately as those who called for Jesus' crucifixion. For we too have taken God's gifts and used them against him.