

The Power of Pentecost

Scripture: Leviticus 23:15-21; Psalm 81:1-5; Acts 2:1-8, 22-24, 38-41

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May 28, 2023

So that we can more clearly appreciate the Christian celebration of Pentecost, we must also understand the setting in which it happened. This is an eventful time in the city of Jerusalem. It is the annual Harvest Festival celebration at the Temple.

Two great events, both ordained by God, will happen in the city of Jerusalem this week. This Sunday we celebrate one of those great events, the celebration of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit into the lives of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus had promised that He would not leave the disciples as orphans. And today we celebrate the realization of that promise. On this weekend people have come from all over Israel to bring their sacrifices of wheat and barley and animals to the Temple. Faithful Jews from all over the known world have also come to Jerusalem to sacrifice and to celebrate.

If we look at our modern-day maps and translate where the people have traveled from, it is amazing to realize what a great distance some have traveled and what a great festival this is. They have traveled from the countries that would be present day Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Turkey, Libya, Italy, Greece, and Saudi Arabia. In addition there were non-Jews who also worshiped Yahweh who had come to Jerusalem from many countries. The population of Jerusalem during this festival swelled to perhaps 150,000 people.

This is a festival that is characterized by joy and singing and laughter. In fact, God has given to the people of Israel a statute, an ordinance, and a decree to that effect. God was serious about the people coming together as a celebrating people. The verses of the Psalm that was read this morning are a fragment of the song that was sung by the people as they entered the Temple. Music was important.

The musicians played

- the tambourines with their tinkling sound;
- the autoharps with their deeper sound,
- the harp with its thin notes

All these instruments would accompany the singing and the shouts of joy of the people as they marched into the Temple.

Move now to that upper room in the house in Jerusalem. This house has been the residence of the 120 people since the ascension of Jesus back into heaven. It has now been 50 days since the resurrection. These 120 people, including the disciples and possibly their wives, and the 70 followers of Jesus who were the ones He had sent out into the villages, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, have remained together.

As was their Jewish custom, they have gone to the Temple for prayer three times a day but, other than that, they have been working through their new situation without Jesus. They have been waiting and praying. They don't know what, exactly, they are waiting for or when something will happen. But wait, they do, as Jesus instructed them.

Suddenly there is a noise like the sound of a violent, rushing wind (not the wind; just the sound). And there appears in the room something that looks like tongues of fire (not actual fire) that rests on each person. Something wonderful happened to those people. They suddenly began to speak in languages that they had not studied.

The noise that sounds like a violent wind storm blowing through the house also sounds through the city and a great crowd gathers outside the house. The visitors to the city are naturally curious to find out what is happening. They listen to the disciples talking in different languages and they accuse them of having too much to drink. But the mood changes when Peter begins to preach.

The ability to speak in languages that they had not studied was a special gift that was given for a particular purpose. Remember, Peter is going to preach one of the greatest sermons of all time and the response is going to be one of the greatest of all time. The folks from other countries will need an interpreter. And, in a one-time event, God empowers these people with a special gift needed for that day.

I can see them mingling among the crowd and boldly interpreting, in the language needed, the words of Peter as he preaches. All of their fear and hesitancy has been taken away by the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. As a result of the presence of the Holy Spirit, all those who were followers of Jesus became conscious of a new inner power that completely transformed their lives. They would have the power to go forth into the whole world to do their work of witness-bearing.

Perhaps the great central truth of this day was not just that on this day the Holy Spirit was given for the first time, but that it marked the beginning of the spread of the Gospel outside of Israel. This day marked the birthday of a new community that we know as the Church. The crowd at Pentecost represented people from the known world. Those who responded with belief to the sermon of Peter would return to all of their countries as witnesses to the power of Christ in their lives. The grace of God was intended for all of the people of all of the world.

As disciples, as followers, of Jesus Christ, we too have received the Holy Spirit into our lives. That same Holy Spirit enables us to act with grace and mercy and forgiveness to others. We each have received differing gifts, differing special abilities, from the Holy Spirit who resides within us.

Paul would later write more about the gifts to Christians as he wrote his letters to the various churches. He reminded the followers of Jesus that all were called to use their gifts in ministry (no exceptions). Paul named some of the titles that some ministers would have, such as apostles (the original followers of Jesus), prophets (wise people who would guide), evangelists (people who have a special ability of guiding people to faith in Christ), pastors (those who proclaim the word of God and shepherd the people), and teachers (those who teach with clarity).

There would also be those who have a special ability

- to encourage others,
- to be of service to the church and to others,
- to have the spirit of giving of oneself and one's possessions,
- to provide hospitality,
- and more

Like those first believers, those of us who are present-day believers have a responsibility to share with others what we have discovered. We have the responsibility for a lifestyle that reflects who we say that we are, a lifestyle that demonstrates that we are followers of Jesus Christ. As such, we are to show grace, and mercy, and forgiveness to others. And when the opportunity arises, we are to share with them what faith in Christ means in one's life.

Surely this is a time when we must look upon each person as God's beloved creation. It is a time when our grace must be lived out in caring for one another.

When we use our gifts to be the presence of Christ to others, even in the smallest way, we might be amazed at what we can do. That is our challenge as the Church of Jesus Christ for this present day.

Amen.