

Acts 2: 1-21

Psalm 104: 25-35, 37

I Corinthians 12: 3b-13

St. John 20: 19-23

Pentecost 2023

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.”

Acts 2: 17a

In Acts chapter 10, the apostle Peter is invited to preach to some foreigners, Gentiles, about Jesus Christ... Up to this point in history, only Jewish people had become Christians. But as Peter is preaching, God the Holy Spirit falls upon his listeners! It is a key turning-point in early Church history, as it becomes clear that *everyone* – not just Jewish believers, but people of *all* cultural and religious backgrounds – are welcomed into God’s new covenant relationship through Jesus Christ...

How do we know that the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles during St. Peter’s sermon in Caesarea? After all, the Spirit is like wind – we cannot see the wind (although we can feel its effects). How do we know that the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles too?... We know, because an extraordinary thing happened: Peter... stopped... preaching. Peter stopped his sermon before he was done...

I’ve offered a lot of sermons, and I’ve heard a lot more. I know for a fact – it takes just about a miracle, or an earthquake, to get preachers to stop preaching in the *middle* of a sermon! If preachers have a message we believe God wants us to proclaim, well, by gum and by golly, we want to finish our point!..

Peter had to stop preaching during his sermon, recorded in Acts 10. Something had happened. Or rather, some-*one* – the Spirit of the Lord himself – had begun a new thing. People’s lives had been changed for ever. The Gentiles began to give praise to God – expressing gratitude and joy for who God is, and what God had done in their lives...

Today – Pentecost Sunday – we celebrate the gift of God the Holy Spirit upon all the disciples of Jesus Christ, from the apostles (a little less than 2 months after that first Easter Day), through to the Gentiles, throughout the Church’s history: From “Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria, to the ends of the earth...” Right up to now, *today*; in this beautiful little church building, about 2000 years later, and about half a world away. God is up to something, and people’s lives are continuing to be changed today!...

Before the coming of Jesus Christ, God the Holy Spirit would be at work in the world in particular people of faith or seasons, for particular tasks... The Spirit of the Lord was at work in God’s work of creation, hovering over the ancient waters. The Spirit of the Lord came upon people of faith for particular tasks, such as the artisans making a glorious temple in which to worship the Lord; or the ancient prophets... But before Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit would come upon particular people of faith, for particular tasks...

But that all changed, on the Day of Pentecost. Ten days or so after Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit did not act in people's lives for a short period of time, but for *all* time. The Holy Spirit didn't come only to a handful of people of faith, but for *all* believers... After the finished ministry of Jesus Christ, a new era is underway. The gift of God's holy presence rests in every believer's heart and life...

The ancient prophesy by Joel, centuries before the birth of Jesus, is finally fulfilled:

Then afterwards

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my Spirit. (Joel 2: 28-29)

Many things have changed over the years. Yet, God's Spirit consistently makes several *changes* in believers' lives, whether we live in ancient Palestine, or 21st century Canada...

When the Spirit of Christ fills us, when we know we belong to Christ, there are changes in our hearts, in our human spirits. We can have a quiet confidence that we are forgiven. In the gospel reading for today, from John 20, the risen Lord Jesus makes a special link between the presence of the Holy Spirit, and forgiveness:

Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' (St. John 20: 21-23)

All of us have regrets. But we aren't meant to keep carrying regrets. Instead, we make restitution and apologize when we can, and we give it over to God. Then (no matter how we might feel at the moment – feelings come and go), we are set free...

Through the Spirit's work, we are forgiven. Further, the Holy Spirit points us to Jesus Christ... Remember when those Gentiles received the Holy Spirit in Acts 10? The Spirit came while St. Peter was preaching about Jesus Christ. With the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Gentiles responded in gratitude for what Christ has done... The same is true when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles at Pentecost: They were giving praise to Jesus Christ...

God is at work throughout his creation. When an atheist begins to admire Jesus Christ – perhaps he or she is struck by Jesus’ humility, or his moral teachings, or Jesus’ stand against injustice– or perhaps begins to be convicted of how much our lives today fall short – that is the Holy Spirit, calling the sinner home...

When we know, however gently or slowly, that we are responding to the Son of God, then the Holy Spirit continues to work in our lives, to draw us to Christ. It’s a good thing to have the conviction in our hearts, “We love him...”

So, these are inner changes – knowing we are forgiven; being drawn deeper into our lives in Christ.

There are also *outer* changes, when one is a Christian. The New Testament sometimes calls these “spiritual fruits...” First, we’re inclined to praise, to recognize with gratitude the goodness and mercy of the Lord, and all the blessings around us.

Many of us have English or Scottish backgrounds, and in those cultures, people are often not very expressive of their feelings. We’ve all heard the bad jokes to British school-children, that they were told to have a “stiff upper lip...” Instead, I suggest, it’s good for us to express our gratitude... We do this as we worship together, as we do this morning. Perhaps instead of seeing only what is wrong with the world, we might start counting our blessings...

There is a story of a couple who were hiking in a rural area. The pathway led to a hilltop, and they could look below at a stunning vista of verdant trees and singing birds and warm sunshine. The wife was overcome with gratitude, and spontaneously shouted out, “Thank you, Mother Nature, for all your beauty...” A second or two later, a faint voice echoed back in reply, “No charge...” The theology wasn’t quite right, but that woman was responding to God’s gift of a beautiful world...

So, one outer change is that we become inclined to praise. A second outward change is each of us has been given at least one spiritual gift, that we can use to bless others. We can bless others in the Church. We can bless hurting people in our world. Some of these gifts are seemingly very ordinary, like the gift of administration. Others can be extraordinary, such as when we notice little miracles around us; or, some people have a particular gift to bring physical, emotional, or spiritual healing. The point is, all of us have been given at least one spiritual gift in Christ, and we’re meant to express these gifts sensitively “for the common good.” Today’s second reading puts it this way:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge

according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

(I Corinthians 12: 4, 7-11)

Without exception, all of us have been given at least one spiritual gift by the Holy Spirit. We're meant to employ the gifts we have been given, to build up the Church, and to bless the world.

(If we aren't sure what our spiritual gift is, the Rev. Marie is particularly good at helping people identify their spiritual gifts...)

After the finished work of Christ, the Holy Spirit came upon all the disciples of Jesus, for all time. We are drawn to Jesus Christ; we can be confident of his absolute forgiveness when we repent. Outwardly, we are led to praise and to offer our gifts.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Son; ever one glorious God.

Amen.