
JUST AS HE PROMISED

Acts 2:1-21

May 31, 2020

What's so special about Pentecost? Why do we celebrate it every year, even decorating the church in red? For most people, Pentecost is an obscure word that means nothing. Even for many Christians, Pentecost isn't even a blip on their radar. Oh, there's Christmas and Easter, maybe Lent, but Pentecost is largely forgotten by most Christians. So what's so special about Pentecost?

For Old Testament believers, Pentecost was a special festival. God had commanded them to celebrate the spring harvest 50 days after the Passover Sabbath—hence the Greek word Pentecost, which means “fiftieth.” Jews traveled from all over to Jerusalem to celebrate this important harvest festival. Year after year, Jewish pilgrims packed the ancient city for Pentecost. This was a joyous festival, but that's not why Pentecost is special for us today.

You see, Pentecost is special, because on this day God did something that every one of us has failed to do. He kept his every promise. He did everything JUST AS HE PROMISED, and he continues to fulfill those promises.

It was late spring. Fifty days had passed since the Passover Sabbath, but more importantly, it was fifty days since Jesus had risen from the dead. For the followers of Christ, the weeks had been a whirlwind of activity ever since the women had discovered his empty tomb and heard the angels tell them, **“He is not here; For he has risen, just as he said.”** (Matthew 28:6) In the days that followed, Jesus appeared to his disciples individually or when they gathered. During those forty days, Jesus taught his disciples and helped them to see how he had come to fulfill all of God's promises in the Old Testament. He also gave them promises of even greater knowledge and confidence to come.

What Jesus told his disciples in those forty days was not unlike what he told them in the Upper Room on the night he was betrayed. **“I have spoken these things to you while I remain with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you.”** (John 14:25-26) Jesus promised a gift beyond their imagination. He would pour out his Holy Spirit on his faithful people so the good news of his peace could spread to the ends of the earth.

When forty days had passed, Jesus raised his hands in blessing and ascended into heaven. A bittersweet mix of joy and sorrow filled the disciples. They rejoiced because of the promises their Savior had left for them. The Comforter, the Holy Spirit was coming, but their beloved Teacher

and Savior was no longer visibly with them. Even so, they went back to Jerusalem and stayed there gathering daily for worship and prayer.

When Pentecost arrived, pilgrim-packed streets bustled with joyful celebration while the cacophony of many languages filled the air. “Devout Jews from every nation under heaven” were staying in Jerusalem. It was a beautiful festival day, but what no one realized was how life-changing that day would be. Meanwhile, Jesus’ followers “were all together in one place,” gathered for prayer and meditation on what Jesus had taught them.

“Suddenly a sound like that of a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying. They saw tongues like flames of fire that separated and rested on each one of them.” All the hustle and bustle in Jerusalem suddenly stopped. They thought they were hearing a terrible wind. To us, it would’ve sounded like a freight train or when a tornado or hurricane passes over your home. Yet there was no wind at all, not even a breeze. The sound came from heaven and confused the crowds as it filled the house where Jesus’ disciples were gathered. What was going on? People came running from all over.

Suddenly those near the house and within it saw something very unusual. Above the disciples what looked like tongues of fire appeared and separated. The tongues of fire came to rest on each person in the house. Meanwhile outside a confused crowd started to gather, but the disciples knew what was happening. Jesus was keeping his promise.

Even more remarkable than the violent sound or the tongues of fire was what happened next. **“They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them.”** Loudly and clearly, each disciple spoke in a language he did not know. This wasn’t unintelligible babble, but real languages that were instantly recognized by the many pilgrims gathered outside the house. Luke tells us, **“When this sound occurred, a crowd came together and was confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded and amazed, saying, ‘Look, aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that each of us who can hear them in our own native language? ...We hear them declaring the magnificent acts of God in our own tongues.’ They were all astounded and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’”**

Just as Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit enabled his disciples to proclaim the “magnificent acts of God” in the languages of every nation gathered there in Jerusalem—people from all over the known world. The disciples proclaimed one message—the good news of Jesus, the Savior of the world, the Savior who kept his promises that day and changed lives forever.

...But not everyone was impressed. Some in the crowds ridiculed the messengers. “They’re drunk on new wine.” “They’ve been celebrating the harvest a little too much and too long. It’s all just drunken nonsense!” They tried to explain away and even ridicule what God was actually doing

right then and there. Yet the Holy Spirit had a response that silenced his critics. Peter and the apostles, who had once hidden behind locked doors for fear of the mobs, were now emboldened to proclaim the Word of God to the nations.

Peter got up with the other eleven apostles and addressed the crowd. He left no doubt that these followers of Christ were not only sober and clear-headed, but also recipients of God's initial fulfillment of an ancient prophesy. **"Fellow Jews and all you residents of Jerusalem, let me explain this to you and pay attention to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it's only nine in the morning. On the contrary, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'And it will be In the last days,' says God, 'that I will pour out my Spirit on all people...I will even pour out my Spirit on my servants in those days, both men and women and they will prophesy.'"** Of course, they weren't drunk! It was only 9 in the morning! More importantly, on that day, God was starting to fulfill his ancient prophecy to pour out his Holy Spirit so his good news would go to the nations and that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Peter went on to speak of the source of that good news—Jesus, the fulfiller of all those ancient promises, Jesus, who had promised those very events long ago. He pierced their hearts when he accused them of putting Jesus to death, but then brought them the healing good news that Jesus died to forgive their sins and was raised to life. He urged them to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. For 3,000 people that day, Pentecost became more than just a festival day. Through the water and Word of Baptism, they received Christ's forgiveness and were welcomed into God's family as his beloved children.

Two thousand years have passed and we're still celebrating. Why? Why is Pentecost still special for you and me? It's not about glorious displays of God's power or the miraculous gift of speaking in other tongues. It's about what God accomplished on Pentecost 2,000 years ago. It's about what God continues to accomplish through simple means—words and water and bread and wine—that he uses to create faith in hearts and pour out his gifts of grace, means through which God still pours out his Holy Spirit on countless people like us.

Pentecost is special because of what Jesus started that day. On that day 2,000 years ago, the Christian church was born not through the sound of a violent wind or with tongues of fire on people's heads, but through the Word of God proclaimed in every known language. That Word of God spread like wildfire across the nations. The "magnificent acts of God" through Christ were taken to every inhabited continent on the earth. Eventually that Word ended up here, changing your life and mine. Through the Word and the waters of Baptism, God has poured out his Holy Spirit to save countless souls.

Now you and I could be like those who mocked the disciples on Pentecost. We could look at the Lord's simple means of Word and Sacrament which he uses to make Christians and think they're not enough. You could think they're not powerful enough, that they'll be easily dismissed by the people around you whose hearts have grown cold with unbelief. By nature, you and I would much rather blow people away with awesome displays of power and glory. We think that such displays will be more "effective," but God doesn't promise that and that's not how God works.

No, he uses his Word shared through fumbling, stumbling lips like yours and mine, a Word that brings peace to troubled hearts, comfort to the grieving, healing to the hurting, and life to the dead. You know that because you've seen the Word do that in your own life. Then he connects that Word to plain water and makes it holy, so that in Baptism, an infant, a child, an adult is transformed from a hostile enemy to a beloved child welcomed into the arms of your gracious Father. Then Jesus takes bread and wine and with them gives his own body and blood to forgive your sins, to strengthen your weary faith, and to assure you that when your eyes close in death, he'll keep one more promise to you—to bring you home to heaven.

That, my friends, is why Pentecost matters. That's why we still celebrate Pentecost. Jesus did everything just as he promised. He poured out his Holy Spirit on his disciples and pours him out even now on you through his Word and Sacraments. He still comforts you and fills you with a real confidence you won't find anywhere else, because it's a confidence based on the promises of a Savior-God who proved himself trustworthy with blood, an empty tomb, and a perfect record of fulfilled promises.

Someday Jesus will fulfill his final promise that he started to fulfill on that first Pentecost. Someday he will come again on "the great and glorious day of the Lord," and on that day, he will call you to join him in the glories of heaven forever. In the meantime, with all the Christian church, we pray, "Come, Holy Spirit! Renew our hearts and kindle in us the fire of your love." Amen.