

# “THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT”

Acts 2:1-24

The Day of Pentecost (Series A)

June 4, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon text for this Day of Pentecost comes from *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 24. It is on page 771 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Scripture reading. From Acts 2, we begin reading at verse 1.

<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. <sup>7</sup> And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, <sup>11</sup> both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” <sup>12</sup> And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup> But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. <sup>15</sup> For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. <sup>16</sup> But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> “ ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams;  
<sup>18</sup> even on my male servants and female servants  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.  
<sup>19</sup> And I will show wonders in the heavens above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;  
<sup>20</sup> the sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

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<sup>21</sup> And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

<sup>22</sup> “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—<sup>23</sup> this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. <sup>24</sup> God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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On this first Christian Pentecost, God poured out his Holy Spirit upon a young and very small Christian Church. The Holy Spirit filled these 120 believers, and they all began speaking in foreign tongues—languages they did not previously know. Imagine the excitement that created! It was a remarkable miracle of the Holy Spirit. And, if we skip ahead to the end of the story, the result was that three thousand new believers were baptized and added to the Church that day (2:41). In one day, a congregation of 120 ballooned to over three thousand. That’s a growth of 2500% in one day. And it was all because the Holy Spirit showed up in power and did something amazing. So it might make us wonder, *Why don’t we talk about the Holy Spirit more often?*

Now, that’s a good question, and it’s worth considering. The simple answer is simply that the Holy Spirit doesn’t really want us to. Now that might sound kind of strange. Why would the Holy Spirit not want us to talk about him? Well, it’s not like the Holy Spirit doesn’t want us to talk about him at all. If that were the case, the Scriptures wouldn’t say anything about the Holy Spirit, and we would already be in trouble for saying this much. So it’s not as if the Holy Spirit doesn’t want us to say anything about him. It’s simply that the Holy Spirit would rather talk about Jesus. That, after all, is the Holy Spirit’s job. He directs our attention to Jesus Christ. That, really, is how 3,000 souls were added to the Church on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit’s job is to convict us of our sins, create faith in Jesus Christ, and comfort us as we await the visible return of Jesus (John 16:8-11).

So for this reason, the Holy Spirit has often been referred to as “the *shy* member of the Trinity.” And perhaps you have heard this description. The point is that the Holy Spirit doesn’t seek attention. In fact, he directs attention to Jesus instead. And this is right. But when you really think about it, that doesn’t mean the Holy Spirit is shy. It’s not like he’s afraid to speak. If anything, the Holy Spirit should be called “the *chatty* member of the Trinity,” because he does most of the talking. He just doesn’t talk that much about himself. The Holy Spirit directs you to one person, and one person only: Jesus Christ, because it is in Jesus Christ that we find our salvation, and that is what the Holy Spirit wants.

So how do you know if a worship service or an event or a book or whatever—how do you know if it is Spirit-filled? Ask yourself two questions. First, *Who is being proclaimed to me?* If the answer is *Jesus*, then go on to the next question: *What is being proclaimed about Jesus?* If it’s the forgiveness of sins through his death and resurrection, then you’ve got it. But if the answer is something else, you can be certain this is not the work of the Holy Spirit.

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So if you are hearing the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, then you can be certain the Holy Spirit is present and active, even if there is no hint of anything miraculous in sight.

Now that doesn't mean we should expect everything to be ordinary and mundane. And it certainly doesn't mean we should write off everything miraculous as fake. Boring is not the new mark of the Holy Spirit. The definitive mark of the Holy Spirit is, and always has been, the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

So we should not be surprised at all if the Holy Spirit does something miraculous. We should pray for the Holy Spirit to be present with us. We should pray for him to be our teacher. We should even pray for healings. And then, if something miraculous happens, we should be excited, but not surprised. And if nothing miraculous happens, we should not be surprised either. We should simply be confident in God's promises, regardless of what we see and feel. Sometimes miracles happen. Sometimes they don't.

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The congregation in Jerusalem—they weren't expecting anything miraculous to happen that day. But all the Christians were gathered together in one place when, suddenly, the Holy Spirit came upon them in power, and each one began speaking in other tongues—languages they did not previously know. So when people from these various nations—people who *did* know these languages—when they heard it, they were amazed.

But not everyone was convinced by this miracle. The mockers said, “They are filled with new wine” (2:13). Now this is obviously a stretch. The mockers are just reaching for any excuse to dismiss the miracle of tongues. I mean, that would have to be some really good wine to give people the ability to speak in other languages. Usually drunkenness has the opposite effect.

So Peter stands up and identifies this as something else; this is the fulfillment of prophecy. He quotes the prophet Joel (2:28-32), and he identifies this miraculous event as the fulfillment of God's promise to pour out his Holy Spirit on all flesh.

And this also marks the beginning of the end times. It says,

“ ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh’ (2:17).”

This means we are living in the end times *right now*. If we use this prophecy from Joel as an indicator, the Day of Pentecost—this first Christian Pentecost, almost two thousand years ago—marks the beginning of the end times. And we have been living in the end times ever since.

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I think it's helpful to think of these last days as the overlapping of two different ages. There is the old age, which is marked by sin and death. We are certainly still living in this age, because we see the signs of it all around us, and even within us. Then there is the new age that dawns in Jesus Christ. This new age is marked by forgiveness, life, and salvation.

These two ages are contradictory to one another. And that helps explain all the tension and confusion and even suffering the Church endures. We live in a time when these two ages overlap and war against each other. We see this war in the world around us, in the Church, and even within our own persons. The old and the new are at odds with each other. And that creates a level of conflict and suffering that doesn't even occur if the old age exists by itself. But since these two ages are both trying to exist at the same time, there is an ever-increasing conflict

between them. And it results in a war that will go from bad to worse until God finally says, *Enough!*

Then, on that “great and magnificent ... day of the Lord,” Jesus himself will descend from heaven and put an end, once and for all, to the old age. As we live in these last days, we expect the *last* day to happen at any time—the “great and magnificent ... day of the Lord” (2:20). We are looking for that day when Christ will return in visible form.

For some, this is going to be a day of judgment and terror. Jesus comes to judge all mankind, even the dead, as we confess in the creed, “He shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead” (Nicene). Judgment isn’t always a pleasant experience. And the descriptions from the prophet Joel certainly give us this impression. “Blood ... fire ... vapor of smoke” (2:19).

“The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood” (2:20).

This doesn’t sound like a family reunion—at least, not a very good one. For those who belong to the old age, it will result in eternal death. But for those who belong to the new age, the prophet Joel says, “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:21).

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So immediately following this quotation from Joel, Peter goes on to tell us exactly who this Lord is and what his name is, so that we might call upon him and be saved. He is Jesus of Nazareth. He performed “mighty works and wonders and signs” (2:22). But he was not received with praise and thanksgiving, as one might expect. Instead, he was met with a cross and nails. How else would the old age respond to the new? But this was not the triumph of the old over the new. It was the opposite. This happened “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (2:23). This was God’s way of triumphing over the old. This was God’s way of defeating sin, death, and the devil. It was God’s way of ushering in the new age. And this became apparent when Jesus rose from the dead. The old cannot overcome the new. “God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (2:24).

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This is what God did to accomplish redemption, and all that is left to do is proclaim this redemption to the prisoners of the old age.

This is what Pentecost is all about. This is why God poured out his Holy Spirit. This is why the Holy Spirit gave those 120 disciples the utterance to speak in other languages. It wasn’t for the purpose of an exciting spiritual experience. It was to proclaim the good news of Jesus and create faith in him. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

If not for the work of the Holy Spirit, you and I would not be saved. The work of Jesus Christ would have been for nothing. He would have accomplished salvation for the entire world, but none of us would actually receive it. It is the Holy Spirit who creates faith in our hearts, so that we might call upon the name of the Lord and be saved.

We think of the ministry of Jesus. The high point of his ministry—at least in terms of numbers—came at the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus gained a large following. But then he explained what the miracle meant. He explained that he is the Bread of Life (John 6:35), and anyone who eats his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life (John 6:54). And you know what

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the result of that was? Everyone left him. Within a day after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus’ “megachurch” had dwindled down to a measly twelve disciples (John 6:66-67).

The great following we might expect Jesus to have never really materialized until Pentecost, when Jesus wasn’t even present in visible form. It didn’t matter how many miracles Jesus performed. It didn’t matter how many people he fed, how many people he healed, or even how many people he raised from the dead, none of Jesus’ sermons ever had the same effect as Peter’s sermon at Pentecost. So why is that? Was Peter a better preacher than Jesus? No; not at all. The problem wasn’t with the preacher. The problem was with the hearers. The hearers belong to the old age, and we will never believe unless the Holy Spirit grants us the gift of faith.

The Holy Spirit is actually the creator of faith. He creates faith, “when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel” (AC V). So we rejoice in this gift of the Holy Spirit, not so much because the Holy Spirit teaches us about himself, but because the Holy Spirit teaches us about Jesus, and he opens our hearts to hear and believe.

The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins. When Peter’s sermon was done, his hearers “were cut to the heart” (2:37). This is the work of the Holy Spirit. He reveals the depravity of our old nature and the futility of the old age. Then he plants the seed of faith and causes it to sprout and grow. The Holy Spirit worked repentance that day. Three thousand souls were born again through baptism, and they were added to the Church (2:41).

From that day on, the Holy Spirit has continued to work as this Gospel has been proclaimed to the farthest corners of the world, even to you and me, two thousand years later and half a world away. The Holy Spirit is the creator of our faith.

And not only that, he is also the sustainer of our faith. Throughout all the ups and downs of life—as the old and new wage war within us and around us—the Holy Spirit continues to comfort us with the Good News of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. He continually reminds us that our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. He reminds us that this war between old and new will someday come to an end. Jesus will return, and righteousness will have the day. Death will not even remain on that day. Death itself will be undone, and the dead will rise.

“Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord”—even those who now sleep in the grave—  
“Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Thanks be to God—Father,  
Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.