

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Pentecost Fires

Acts 2.1-21

Mary 28, 2023

Pentecost is the Greek name for a festival that brought people to Jerusalem from all over the world to give thanks to God for the first fruits of the spring and summer harvest season, offering sacrifices at the Temple of the first squashes, melons, and baby goats of the season. In Greek, it took the name Pentecost, since it was 50 days after the beginning of Passover.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were together all in one place, the 12 disciples plus many of the other early followers of Jesus. It had been a 50 days unlike any other, and I doubt celebrating the harvest festival was foremost on their minds. It was just 50 days ago that Jesus was captured, tried, beaten, crucified, and then three days later, began appearing to them again, resurrected. While they were still trying to make sense of that, it had only been 10 days since he left them at the ascension, and an angel told them to wait in Jerusalem. So here they are. Waiting. For what? They weren't sure. But waiting for something to happen. Something big, probably, they thought. Jesus had said the Holy Spirit will come upon you. I'm not sure they knew exactly what that meant, but by now they were way off the map of what you know and understand. We're way into mystery and wonder and a divine power beyond anything any of them had ever known or could have known. Resurrection? Ascension? Holy Spirit? This was wild stuff, man.

And they were in for it. They stayed together, devoting themselves to prayer, about 120 of them it was said. In the terms we talked about last week, This was Kairos time, not Chronos time, they were living in sacred time, immersed in the strange and wonderful experiences and mysteries, and fear, swirling on and around them. But they had no idea, they could have had no idea what was yet to come.

Then it came, on the day of Pentecost, the harvest festival, God's spirit visited a diverse garden of men and women from every tribe and nation in the known world. A mighty rushing wind, tongues of fire, the Spirit poured out, people of the earth crossing barriers and boundaries to commune with one another. This is what Pentecost Day means to us now: the birthday of the church in God's supernatural, exuberant power...and cake.

Some have noted that Pentecost's miracle of everyone being able to understand one another's language is like a reversal of the Tower of Babel story when all the people of the earth are scattered and divided. This is a story of unity.

Others have noticed this is a story like the burning bush for Moses or the pillar of fire manifesting God's presence for Israel in the exodus journey. Except now the fire rests on each person. The Holy Spirit comes to each. God comes near.

I see here a new Creation story. The Spirit hovering over the chaos of human life as the Spirit hovered over the waters in Genesis at creation. The word of God which brought forth creation, "Let there be light," now becomes the words that bind people together "Let there be a people who have the sacred light." The light of God becomes the light of divine fire upon each one. This is the beginning, the first fruits of the new harvest of a new creation beginning here, as the first, by God's word, God's hand, God's spirit, God's will. Pentecost is a day of new beginnings.

Twenty years ago, on Pentecost Sunday, the doors to this building opened for the first time. On Pentecost, songs were sung for the first time. And the preaching was undoubtedly masterfully given. Twenty years, the Spirit has been moving a month these chairs in this place, in front of and behind this pulpit, swirly around and upon the table and all those whose who serve and receive from it. Thanks be to God.

Christians look back at Pentecost with active imaginations. What would it have been like? What would it be like? The imagination is often followed by a sense of hollowness. Why isn't it like that anymore?

Tom Long, a marvelous preacher, told a story from his early years in ministry:

When he was the brand-new pastor of a small church, he announced to his congregation one Sunday, "Next Sunday morning at ten o'clock, I'm going to start a pastor's church school class on the basics of the Christian faith. If you are new to the faith, or if you would like a refresher course in the faith, I invite you to join me next Sunday at ten."

The next week, he says, I went to my classroom expecting to greet a throng, and I was immediately disappointed. There were only three elementary school children, three little girls, waiting on me for the class. I tried to hide my disappointment and over the next few weeks to do the best I could to teach them about the Christian faith. The week before Pentecost Sunday, I said to them, "Do you girls know what Pentecost is?"

They didn't. So, I said, "Well, Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads and they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world." Two of the little girls took that rather calmly, but one of them got her eyes as big as saucers. And when she could finally speak, she said, "Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday!"

The beautiful thing, Pastor Long says, about that is not that she misunderstood. The beautiful thing is that she thought it could have happened in her church, that God's Spirit could have come even to her little congregation and given them a word to speak that the world desperately needs to hear.¹

¹ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003134/whats_the_gift

Some churches make sure that everyone thinks it can happen in their church, every Sunday, and they got to great lengths to be sure: light shows, fog machines, expertly timed chord changes in the 10th repetition in the emotive love song to Jesus. I kind of thought yesterday we should get into this. I want a hat that looks like these banners. And we discovered the AC wasn't working in here, so we figured, all those tongues of fire probably made the room pretty hot on Pentecost, why fix it? But alas, I have no fiery hat, and we fixed the AC. And like Pastor Tom Long, when we talk about Pentecost, we do so in the past tense. It was . . . It happened . . . it was when . . . because if something like that happened to us, well, we must have been absent that day.

But the thing is, you don't control the Holy Spirit. Pentecost wasn't a festival of the Holy Spirit. It was a harvest festival transformed into an ingathering of souls. Manufactured emotion doesn't equate to the movement of the Spirit. And stifled emotion doesn't stop the Spirit from the ministry of God's presence in the lives of men and women.

Have you ever heard of a man named Blaise Pascal? I want to share his story. Blaise Pascal lived in the 1600s. He's just like you and me. At age 16, he wrote a treatise on projective geometry. A scholar no less than Rene Descartes read his theorem and was convinced that Pascal's father, a notable scholar, had written it. When he was assured the son had done it, he sniffed at it, "Well, that's fine then, but there's much more about this that a 16-year-old could not possibly know." Pascal is said to have responded, "Ok, boomer." As if that weren't enough, he went on to invent the first mechanical calculator, pioneered probability theory, invented the forerunner of public transportation, and contributed significant advancements in fluid mechanics in the study of vacuums and pressure differentials. All this to say is whatever you high school graduates are headed to study in college: computer engineering, physics, chemistry, mathematics, economics, finance, Pascal is back there somewhere cheering you on. Oh, he also wrote philosophy and theology.

But there is another part of his story. After his death, there was discovered a handwritten note sewed into the inside of the jacket of this accomplished scholar and engineer. He published quite a bit in his life, including the science already mentioned, philosophy and religious essays. But this he never published or shared with anyone. It was his and his alone, and he sewed it into his jacket near his heart.

It is an account of an intense spiritual experience he had that he never wanted to forget. In contrast to his erudite public writings, this is stammering speech, the kind you write with a pencil that moves as if on its own. It's the kind of thing you write when you're trying to put in words something that you experienced which is way beyond any words you have. This is what he wrote:

The year of grace 1654

Monday, November 23 . . .

From about ten-thirty in the evening to about half an hour after midnight.

Fire.

*God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants.
 Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace.
 God of Jesus Christ.
 "Thy God shall be my God."
 Forgetting the world and everything, except God.
 He is only found by the paths taught in the Gospel.
 Grandeur of the human soul.
 "Just Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you."
 Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.
 I separated myself from him:
 "My God, will you abandon me?"
 May I not be eternally separated from him.
 "This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and him whom you have sent,
 Jesus Christ."
 Jesus Christ.
 Jesus Christ.
 I separated myself from him; I fled him, renounced him, crucified him.
 May I never be separated from him!
 He is only kept by the paths taught in the Gospel.
 Total and sweet renunciation.
 Total submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.
 Eternally in joy for a day of trial on earth.
 I will not forget your words. Amen.*

These are experiences that make a person. He does not cease to be a first-class physicist, mathematician, engineer, psychologist, and philosopher of concrete humanity. But he stammers. *Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace.* Romano Guardini writes, "All this is new to him. He had longed for it, but without possessing it. He had thought about God with concepts, but without arriving at any reality. He had exerted himself, but not gotten off the ground—now he stands before the reality of God." And he stammers.

May you, too, have an experience of the living God, the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ, that brings you to the edge of your words, and then beyond them. May you stammer and stutter and not be able to make complete sentences or thoughts of the God who has invaded them and cannot be contained in your language. And there, discover, that you are speaking the language of the Spirit, the groaning of the heart--the only language everyone in the world can understand—the language of the heart set on fire.

Amen.

