

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
St. John in the Wilderness  
Pentecost, Year B, 5-23-21

## **Acts 2:1-21**

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to

one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

    `In the last days it will be, God declares,  
    that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
    and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
    and your young men shall see visions,  
    and your old men shall dream dreams.

    Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
    in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
    and they shall prophesy.

    And I will show portents in the heaven above  
    and signs on the earth below,  
    blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

    The sun shall be turned to darkness  
    and the moon to blood,  
    before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' "

### **Romans 8:22-27**

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

### **What Pentecost is All About**

We have arrived at Pentecost Sunday. Before we jump into our message for today, I think we need some context about what Pentecost actually is. Easter season, or Eastertide, runs for seven weeks, for 49 days. On the fiftieth day, Easter culminates as we celebrate Pentecost. Today is known as when the gift of the Holy Spirit was given -- the Advocate and

guide, the Paraclete -- that Jesus promised would come. The Spirit shows up today and the Church is born.

It's a joyous day. It's a fun day. Today we get to remember that we are all Pentecostals. In fact, this day and this reading from Acts is the basis for the entire Pentecostal movement of Christianity. It's not really about handling snakes or speaking in tongues, but it is definitely about the Spirit-filled life.

You have to know the basic timeline first of all. On Easter, Jesus is raised from the dead and appears to his disciples. Jesus continues to be with them in some way and appears to them in the flesh for forty days. On that fortieth day, he ascends into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father -- that's Ascension Day. But he promises his disciples as he ascends that he will send them the Spirit to guide them and so, ten days later, we have this story from Acts of something strange and powerful happening. It's the story of Pentecost.

The disciples were all together in one place for an important Jewish feast happening at this time. The Feast of Weeks is when the law was given in Exodus. It happens fifty days after the Passover. Suddenly from heaven the sound of a rushing, even a violent, wind fills the house where the disciples are sitting. And the text says, "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." Now you might be curious to know that, since we had Bishop José with us last

week, that the bishop's hat, known as a mitre, is shaped like it is because of this passage which says that a tongue of fire rested on each of the apostles. The mitre is shaped like a tongue of fire and is often red because the bishop is doing this apostolic, Spirit-filled work that we are hearing about today.

Did you know that Pentecost is often a day with great liturgical experimentation in worship? There are languages and fire and doves and all kinds of things. Deacon Sandy doesn't know this, but we are going to take some of that chemical they use in Hollywood when they need to light someone on fire for a film and put it on Sandy's vestments for a Holy Spirit, fire burning, kind of moment. I actually heard a story about a young rector who wanted to make a Pentecost impression, so he got some kind of fire going in his church's baptismal font during the Sunday liturgy. The only problem was that the font was a large metal bowl. I don't know what kind of metal it was other than the kind starts to bend when it gets heated up. The century-old font was never really the same after that and the rector still hasn't regained the parish's trust!

Now our story continues, and all of the disciples are filled with this Holy Spirit and begin to proclaim Christ to anyone who will listen. People gathered from every nation were there and they heard the disciples proclaiming Jesus in their own language. No UN translator earpieces were needed! Everyone was amazed and perplexed at this and some

said, in what is one of the best lines in all of Scripture, “These guys have been drinking!” The humor continues when Peter stands up to address the crowd and he begins by saying, “Come on guys, we are not drunk. It’s only 9am!”

Then Peter reminds them of the words of the prophet Joel through whom the Lord said that God was going to pour out God’s Spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. Upon slave and free, men and women, rich and poor, God’s Spirit is given and what a gift it is.

This story is very much grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Spirit of God hovered over the dark chaos in creation. The Spirit of God brought life to the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel. And yet still, the reason the disciples are gathered in Jerusalem is because this is where one had to go to truly worship God. That is where the really sacred ground was. That is where the Temple was and the Holy of Holies was. If you wanted to be right with God, then you had to go to Jerusalem. You had to go to the Temple.

But what Peter and the disciples are declaring is that God has come uniquely and fully in the person of Jesus Christ who proclaimed the Kingdom of God has arrived. Jesus teaches love, shares God’s love, challenges those who are trying to manipulate God to remember how to love, and ultimately gives himself away entirely in love for the world.

All of this happens in Jerusalem. The Temple, the law, and the rituals of the Hebrew people create the context for what God is doing in Christ. He is fulfilling the law in his every move.

At Pentecost there is this shift: the Spirit of God is found not just in Jerusalem, not just in the Temple, not just on Sinai's height where the law is given -- the Spirit of God is now found inside of you. You have been made, by Christ, into a Temple of the Holy Spirit. Though you were not good enough on your own, Christ has made you righteous and pure and blameless so that God might dwell in you uniquely each and every day. That's why in baptism, once someone is buried with Christ in his death and raised with him in his resurrection, we take oil and anoint them. You know what we say? "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." Ever since your baptism, the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in you to guide you, to love you, to intercede on your behalf, and to form with your fellow disciples the Spirit-filled community that we call the Church. This is what Pentecost is all about. The Holy Spirit means that God is with you and in you continuing the work of Jesus Christ in your life and in the world.

So, when you think of Pentecost, and even the season after Pentecost -- think about the Holy Spirit in you, with you, guiding, loving you, bringing you back to Christ again and again. "Pentecost = Holy Spirit!" Take that one home with you! Pentecost equals the Holy Spirit in you.

There are two ways that the Spirit-filled life is evident -- two examples of what that means. First of all, let's look at our Romans reading. Paul writes that all of creation has been longing -- groaning even in labor pains for God to complete the work begun in Jesus Christ. God is doing this work within each of us uniquely as we are sanctified by the Holy Spirit, as we are made more Holy, more like Christ all the time. And yet we are so wounded. We are so broken. We are so weak. Our weaknesses are many: wounds of the body, wounds of the soul, things we have done and said and thought and things that we have left undone and unsaid and thoughts we'd rather not admit we have.

But what does Paul say about life in the Spirit? The Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. We do not even know how to pray as we ought but the very Spirit of God living inside of you, filling your emptiness and binding your wounds, that Spirit intercedes for you with sighs too deep for words. God not only is in you because you have been made into a Temple for God, but the Spirit is praying for you and in you when you don't even know the words to say for yourself. When tears are flowing and teeth are clenched, the Spirit intercedes for you with sighs too deep for words. What a gift! What a gift it is to think that Holy Spirit dwells in me and intercedes for the me -- one of the saints -- according to the will of God.

The second way the Spirit-filled life is evident is through the church being knit together in one fellowship of faith. What I mean by that, first of all, is Pentecost is the reversal of Babel. In Genesis 11, the Scriptures say that all people spoke the same language and were proud of their accomplishments. The Tower of Babel is this story of humanity's pride, when people think they can build with their own strength a tower to God -- to the heavens. "Let us make a name for ourselves," they said. The story says that God confused their language and ended their tower building narcissism.

Well at Pentecost, you have people from all the world gathered: Parthians, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia. There are people from New York there and the mid-westerners. There are California liberals and Texas conservatives. Priuses and pick-up trucks. There are folks from Asheville and folks from Edneyville. They are all people, but they are also all tribes with their own customs and ways of talking and thinking and seeing the world. But when the Gospel is proclaimed, the confusion of their languages ceases. They hear the Good News in their own tongue and divisions actually come to an end.

When Peter tells them -- when that tongue of fire speaks the Gospel to them -- that Christ was crucified but now lives and is their true Messiah and Lord, the text says. "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart." This is all Acts 2. They were cut to the heart and asked, "What

should we do.” “Be baptized, receive the Holy Spirit, and join us in being Church,” is the answer. So they were baptized that day. The Spirit brought together all of those different folks into one family. They devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Believers held things in common, sharing what they had with the Apostles. There was not need among them. They spent time in worship together, breaking bread with glad and generous hearts. God shaped them as people from all these different backgrounds, different cultures, different languages into a community of Common Prayer, common language, common conviction that life in Christ -- life filled with the Holy Spirit -- is a joyous and beautiful and life-giving existence.

Pentecost equals the Holy Spirit on the loose and filling you. The Holy Spirit fills you and prays for you even in your weakness. And the Spirit brings you to share in the fellowship of the saints, where God’s Kingdom is realized in Christian community. That is Pentecost!