



Filled with the Spirit

In the name of him who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire, dear friends in Christ: In the text from which I preached last week, we found the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem in those several days after the Lord's ascension into heaven and yet before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that we're celebrating today. Then the believers were few in number; only about 120 in all. And overall they were a fairly motley group: several former fishermen, a hated tax collector, an anti-Roman terrorist, a carpenter's widow and her sons, men from various other blue-collar vocations, and a variety of women – a couple of whom were wealthy widows, and others who had been prostitutes or possessed by demons before encountering Jesus. Oh, there were a few from the upper crust of society in the group: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, both of whom were wealthy, well educated, and even on the ruling council of the Jews – the highest status one might achieve. They were among the believers, presumably with their families; but they weren't among the leaders of the group. They may have been at the top of society, but here they were counted with the rank and file. And when Peter raised the issue of choosing a replacement for Judas to round out the number of twelve Apostles, their names didn't come up as candidates.

Before removing his visible presence from them by his ascension, Jesus had given this diverse and rag-tag assembly a mission. Not much, really; just go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. In other words, do what had never been done before in the history of the world. Turn people from their pagan beliefs and philosophies, turn them from their sins – even the ones they cherish most deeply, turn them into disciples of Jesus. It was unheard of. The mindset in the ancient world was that each nation and people had its own set of gods. The Egyptians had theirs, the Romans and Greeks theirs, the Babylonians and Persians theirs, and all the others had theirs. And people were fine with that. They had no trouble fitting it into their way of thinking and seeing no conflict. Why can't there be lots of gods and all of them be equally real? The Jews alone asserted that there was just one God over all creation. But even though they had communities in most of the major cities in the empire, they weren't into evangelism. They saw themselves alone as the chosen race and they distanced themselves from the rest. This is our faith, our God. They're not for you. Now, it happened on occasion that curious onlookers inquired about their faith and joined them – in sort of a second class status; but there was never any active effort to convert such people who were called proselytes. Oh, and it's worth noting that the Jews in general were the ones most opposed to the Christian Gospel. So the one group of people out there who at least shared the Christian concept of God was also the group most likely *not* to give Christians a fair hearing.

Taking all this into consideration, if you're sitting in this group of 120 or so Christian believers, you've got to be thinking, how in the world are we to accomplish daunting task? Where do we even begin? We're ill equipped, unprepared, have few means, and are pretty much despised by the crowds around us who so gleefully called for the death of the one we call Lord. They'd be happy to see us dead too. And we are to go out there and make disciples of them, disciples of Jesus? Forget it. It's impossible.

And so it would have been for mere humans like us. But what's impossible for us is child's play to the Lord, for with him all things are possible. And that, my friends, is what the Church celebrates today: how the Lord Jesus sent his Holy Spirit with power upon the faithful

few gathered there in Jerusalem, how the Spirit filled them with his energizing presence, and how he, the Holy Spirit, gave them the faith, the boldness, and the ability to do things that were otherwise beyond them. Jesus had told them to wait in the city until they were clothed with power from on high. On the day of Pentecost that power arrived in full force.

It was a Sunday morning, the fiftieth day after the Lord's resurrection, and the tenth day since his ascension into heaven. The believers were gathered for worship, which they understood not as what we do for God by offering our praises and displaying our devotion to him; but rather it's about what God does for us – the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation he gives us – through his Word and Sacraments. It was as they were thus engaged, possibly even at that point in the service when they were praying for Jesus' promise to be fulfilled, that the Spirit came upon them.

We're told that suddenly there was the sound of a mighty rushing wind from heaven. It doesn't say how long it lasted, but it must have gone on for some time because it drew a large crowd to the place where they were. In the past I wondered why the Spirit would manifest himself with the sound of wind of all things; but now I think I've got it. It calls to mind the creation of the first man, Adam, who was formed from the dust of the ground. He was nothing more than a lump of lifeless clay, powerless to do anything, until the Lord leaned forward, got right into his face, and exhaled into him the spirit and breath of life. Then again, on the evening of his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples who at the time were a weak, confused, and trembling collection of cowards. At first they were terrified to see Jesus. But he bid them peace. He showed them his hands and side – the wounds by which he made their peace with God. And then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And with the Spirit he gave them the full power and authority to forgive sins in his name – something mere humans can't do otherwise. Now, on Pentecost, the Lord Jesus is breathing his Spirit upon them again, this time from his place of exultation on high; and this time to give them even more supernatural power.

The Holy Spirit fills each one of them and shows himself visibly in the form of tongues of fire that rest upon their heads. Fire immediately suggests light which makes it possible to see – both in a sensory way, "Now I can see", and a mental sense, "Now I can understand." Fire also suggests cleansing, as precious metals are purified through heating them and pouring off the worthless dross. So by appearing as fire the Holy Spirit is showing his work on the believers of spiritual enlightenment and sanctification. He is opening their minds to understand more of God's truth, and he is revealing sins and bringing them to repentance and thus to greater trust in Jesus through whom they are cleansed and forgiven.

Ah, but there's more: this fire that sits on their heads does not burn them. Though God is said to be "a consuming fire", this is a fire that doesn't consume. And that recalls another such fire, the one seen by Moses when the Lord appeared to him in the burning bush. What attracted Moses to the bush in the first place was that though it was clearly on fire, the bush was not being consumed. A desert plant like that should have been burnt up in a flash. Poof and it's gone. But no. And the point is that the Lord *spoke* to Moses from this burning bush that was not consumed. And that's what he now does through the believers, each one of whom has become a burning bush speaking forth God's Word. What was the message? For Moses it was God's plan to save his people from slavery in Egypt. And for the believers on the Day of Pentecost the message being proclaimed by the Lord through their mouths was about God's work of rescuing his people from the slavery of sin and death by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is what the gathering crowd heard when they came to investigate the sound of the mighty wind. That loud noise brought them; but what made them stay and listen was hearing the Lord speaking through the mouths of the faithful – speaking in perhaps twenty different languages or more. That would have been confusing at first; to hear this cacophony of voices all speaking at once in other tongues; but I imagine that it would have sorted itself out very rapidly. If you've ever been in a place where lots of foreigners are gathered and other languages are being spoken, say like in an international airport overseas, you know that your ear is drawn automatically to those who are speaking your own mother tongue. It doesn't make any difference how many other voices you hear. You can't help but tune into the one you understand most readily.

I'm sure that's what happened when on Pentecost the Spirit filled the faithful. The large crowd that came together, many of whom were visitors to Jerusalem having come as pilgrims for the Festival of First Fruits, would have quickly clustered around whichever of the disciples was speaking their native language. There they would have heard about the ministry of Jesus and his Gospel of salvation – God's life-giving Word delivered straight to their hearts in the tongue they knew and understood best. That part they got, I'm sure. What they didn't understand is what in the world was going on. How can these people, most of whom are rustic Galileans who have never been more than fifty miles from their homes, how can they have such polished facility in so many different languages? It was astounding. And it caused them to ask that most Lutheran of questions, "What does this mean?"

It was Peter (the most Lutheran of the Apostles until St. Paul came along) who rose to answer the question. As we heard, he explained that what they were witnessing was the fulfillment of the Word of God given through the prophet Joel, how in the last days the Lord would pour out his Spirit upon all kinds of people, making no distinctions concerning age, gender, or social status. In former times the Lord placed his Spirit of power upon a comparative few, people like Moses, Joshua, the Judges, the Prophets, and a few others whose stories we know. But now the Spirit and his power would be available to everyone – and all who by the Spirit called upon the name of the Lord would be saved.

The reading we heard from Acts ends there, but Peter's message went on. In the course of it, he explained the life and ministry of Jesus. He told how Jesus was the Lord's long promised Christ, and how he died for sin and was raised again. And then he accuses the crowd of having rejected Jesus and of having been complicit in his death. His words crushed them. They knew he was right – that is to say, the Holy Spirit was working through Peter's words to convict them of their guilt before God. They cried out, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter told them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

And that's what happened: the Spirit who first convicted them of their sin now gave them the gift of saving faith in Jesus – and applied Christ's forgiveness to them directly and concretely by the hands of the Apostles in the water of Holy Baptism. Some three thousand souls were added to the Christian Church that day thanks to the work of the Spirit. And it really is amazing. Before the Spirit came and filled them, the initial group of believers was weak and afraid, wondering how they were to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ into all the world. It turns out they didn't have to be concerned about it. On Pentecost the Lord brought the world to them. And by his Spirit he gave them knowledge, understanding, boldness, and the very words to say through which the Spirit breathed life and faith into those who heard them.

Of course, not everyone who heard the words of the Apostles believed. We're told that some who heard the many languages being spoken were convinced that what they were hearing was nothing more than drunken gibberish. Since they couldn't understand everything being said, they concluded that it was meaningless noise. They made fun of the disciples and accused them of being full of a different kind of spirit – one of alcohol. These hardened their hearts against the Spirit's work and refused to listen. Instead they stubbornly clung to the lies and deceptions of Satan, the world, and their own sinful flesh. Those who remained in that state are now lost forever.

And something to remember is that we would be among them even today if not for the powerful working of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. What happened on the first Pentecost of the Christian era was not a onetime event, but rather the dawn of a new age – this present world's last age. Christ by his death made us, his Church, a Temple cleansed. By the forgiveness we received in our Baptisms, he has made us a fitting place for the Spirit of God to dwell. And he does. And in this last age his mighty works continue in and among us. That's what the ministry of the Church is all about. That's why we come together to worship: to hear God's Word, to receive the gifts of salvation in Jesus Christ, and to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit who enlightens us to understand and trust the Gospel, who continually sanctifies us by purifying us of our sins, who enables us to live and love as the children of God, and who gives us the words to bear witness of Jesus Christ and all that he has done for us.

Therefore let this be our prayer while this age lasts: that the Holy Spirit would continue to fill us with his presence and his power that the work of God may show forth in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!