

**June 9, 2019**

**Pentecost**

**Acts 2: 1-21**

**Prayer:** O Trinitarian God who comes to us in the Holy Spirit, help us to understand your ways and your Word this morning. Help us to understand your great gift at Pentecost. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### **Beach Reading**

When we were at the beach in May, one of our housemates went shopping and bought me a refrigerator magnet. It shows Jesus speaking from a mountaintop with people gathered all around.

“Okay everyone, now listen carefully,” he says. “I don’t want to end up with four different versions of this!”

As I’ve said often, I have such respect for the early church, that it *did* allow four different gospel versions. The early church fathers trusted us to be able to read them critically and discerningly even if Mark and Matthew, Luke and John weren’t in lockstep with each other.

We have four stories of Jesus, each different, each fascinatingly crafted to create its own portrait of Jesus.

But I’m going to make a confession. Aside from that refrigerator magnet, I wasn’t reading about Jesus at the beach.

I read five books that week – and not one of them was spiritually uplifting. Three murder mysteries. The cyber-terrorist novel by former President Bill Clinton and James Patterson. And a novel about Shoeless Joe Jackson’s last years by Greenville native Granville Burgess.

In other words, I spent the week with murder and mayhem and intrigue and backstabbing. With car chases and helicopter crashes and assassination attempts. With baseball.

Had I actually brought my Bible to the beach, I would’ve chosen its book in the same category. Its book set among a band of courageous outlaws in the Middle East and Europe. The one with shipwrecks! Snake bites! Prison breaks! Double homicide! Rushing wind and creeping fire.

*The book of Acts.*

“Acts” or “*The Acts of the Apostles*” is a good name for this book, for it is, indeed action-packed. James Bond has nothing on Peter and Paul.

But if Peter and Paul are the 007s of their day, Acts gives us a superhero who is not bound by earthly constraints. In the book of Acts ... *he’s ba...a...ack...*

*The Holy Spirit is back.*

In Genesis, in the very first words of our Bible, we read: **“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”**

*A wind from God* was instrumental in the creation of the world.

And then, in Luke's gospel, an angel came to Mary and told her about the upcoming birth of her son. She asked how that could be, since she was a virgin? And the angel replied, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you....**"

Decades later, over in John's gospel, Jesus told his disciples about his impending death. The disciples were sad, desperate, frightened. They asked, *Where are you going? Can we come with you?*

And Jesus told them that God would send them an Advocate, a Spirit of truth, to be with them in his absence. "**The Advocate,**" he said, "**the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.** (John 14: 26).

Now Luke returns to write an adventure tale about the beginning of the church. And who's the hero? Who's the One starting things off in the most dramatic, most dynamic way possible?

That same wind that swept over the dark waters at creation. That same spirit that overshadowed Mary. That Holy Spirit promised by Jesus to his disciples is now overshadowing the birth of his church.

Let's turn in our Bibles to **Acts 2: 1-21** and see what our hero is up to.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

<sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, 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, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs — in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'

<sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'

<sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> "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.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

<sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

*When the day of Pentecost had come...* Well, what is that? We in the Protestant churches are a little fuzzy on this Pentecost thing.

The Festival of Pentecost was a Jewish celebration, also known as the Festival of Weeks. It occurred at the end of the celebration of the spring harvest, 50 days after Passover. Hence the name, Pentecost. Or "50."

We Christians stole the idea and ran with it. So we have 50 days of Easter, ending in the Christian Pentecost.

And on this first Christian Pentecost, 50 days after the first Easter, a violent wind was blowing. Something new was about to be harvested.

And it began with tongues of fire alighting on each disciple. A strange fire indeed, as Lila sang for us.

Do you remember what John the Baptist said back in the gospel of Luke?

**“I baptize you with water...”** But one is coming who **“will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”**

Now it's time. Here's the Holy Spirit. Here's the fire.

Now the scene shifts to the crowds. Luke takes great pains to let us know they are from every conceivable locale. And each heard the gospel in his own language.

There's a lot of speculation over what exactly was going on here. Some say the disciples were speaking in tongues, as some of the Pentecostal and more fundamental churches still do. But speaking in tongues requires translation. It sounds like garble. No one else understands it.

So I agree with those who say the disciples were speaking in *foreign* languages. That was the whole point. Everyone *could* understand them, no matter what language the hearer understood.

This is an amazing and perplexing scene, and Luke acknowledges that. **“All were amazed and perplexed, saying ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’ ”**

That's my favorite line. If we don't understand something, we can always sneer and discount it. It's so much easier than trying to truly understand for that might require getting to know someone ... or getting involved ... or changing our minds.

Isn't that human nature in a nutshell? Some people were willing to wrestle with the possibility that something new and grand and sacred had burst into their lives. And some sneered, and passed it off as drunkenness on the part of the disciples.

We have different ways of talking about this phenomenon.

Is the glass half empty or half full?

Are you a pessimist or an optimist?

Do you see problems or opportunities?

Is your attitude negative or positive?

What is your perspective?

An entire industry has grown up around the power of positive thinking. Motivational speakers make lots of money trying to persuade salespeople and others that the glass is half full and on its way to overflowing.

I am a great believer that our attitude, our confidence, is 90 percent of any battle. But sometimes our perspective is more than a matter of gritting our teeth and getting on with it. Sometimes the history, the circumstances, of our lives determine our perspective.

I used to have a friend named Sharon. She was one of the most talented newspaper editors I ever worked for. She was smart and imaginative and creative. She could work with writers and artists and photographers to create exceptional feature pages.

She could cook and write. She knew a lot about books and movies and music and travel. She looked, to the outside world, to have it all.

But she didn't see it that way. She had grown in an extremely poor home with two alcoholic parents who beat her and her brothers and sisters. She was the oldest, and so she stood up sometimes to take beatings in order to spare her younger siblings.

An aunt and uncle took her away to live when she was 15, and so she got a college education and the push to pursue a career. But in many ways, it was too late.

In her mind, she was always a child who deserved to be beaten.

It took me years to figure it out, to figure out the unhappiness and the sense of unworthiness, the flashes of anger behind all her success. But Sharon didn't see her life as I saw it, as the rest of the world saw it.

She saw herself as unworthy, unlovable. As she was dying 20 years later, she tried to keep it from her old friends. She wouldn't answer our phone calls, wouldn't let us visit.

I imagine she felt unworthy of our grief.

We can look at the same things and see them so differently.

We can look at the same gospel and see it so differently.

God may be at work in our lives, but if we are not open to the possibility, we may never know it.

God may send someone into our lives to give us encouragement, to give us hope, to give us strength. And we may say, in essence, *He doesn't know what he's talking about. Or She is filled with new wine.*

The second part of this passage is the beginning of a sermon by Peter, our first recorded sermon. He is explaining what has just happened at Pentecost. The proclamation of the Word – one of the main functions of the church – has been born.

I don't pretend to know the meaning of *the violent wind* and the *divided tongues, as of fire*, and the speaking in every language of the known world. Luke uses this language to tell the untellable, to describe the indescribable.

That's why Luke lets Peter give his explanatory sermon on its heels – and why preachers have been trying to explain God's Word ever since. That's why we pray for God's illumination every time we approach a biblical text. That's why we approach the Bible with humility.

Peter points back to the Old Testament prophet Joel, to prove that God is continuing a long-held plan. And his main point is that everyone, simply everyone, was welcome in this new church of Jesus Christ. That's what was behind the preaching in every language, to every nationality that Luke could think of.

On the very day the Holy Spirit was poured out, Peter reminds us that God said: **“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.”** Then a few verses later, God repeats, **“Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they will prophesy.”**

Prophesy is another word for “preach.” And here Peter tells us very clearly that prophesying or preaching, is a function for men and women, sons and daughters, young and old, slave and free in this new church.

This receiving of the Holy Spirit is universally available. It will be poured out on all. Through Joel and then through Peter, God is promising that his Spirit is available to all of us.

So what are we, men and women, sons and daughters, young and old, slave and free, to do with this Spirit that is available to us? We are to follow Jesus' instructions back in chapter 1:

**“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** (Acts 1: 8)

We usually focus on the witnessing part. But there's a promise in there as well: **“You will receive power.”**

There are many of us like my friend Sharon, who feel powerless. Despite how we may look to the world, despite how we may project ourselves, we feel alone and helpless and confused and unloved. Places like the Triune Mercy Center would not exist otherwise.

But we are part of a church born nearly 2,000 years ago in a rush of wind and fire so dramatic that people thought its first preachers were drunk.

Whether you are one of those “amazed and perplexed” by that event or one sneering at it because of the pain of your own experience, there is a place for you in this church.

For here is Joel's conclusion. Here is Peter's conclusion: **“Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”**

That's the story of Pentecost.

That's the story of the church. Amen.