

Acts 2:17-21

“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.”

Isaiah 58:9b-11

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

John 7:37-39

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” ’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Flowing into the World

Happy Birthday, Church! It’s Pentecost, the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit came down like a rushing wind and propelled the disciples out of the upper room and into the world. According to most estimates, we’re 1988 years old today – getting near our 2 millennium celebration. We tend to think

of Pentecost as we think of Easter, as a singular past event, but Pentecost is more than that. We should think of Pentecost as an ongoing event that potentially and hopefully occurs in each of our lives. It's not just something we commemorate – it's something we live.

I'm not talking about being "Pentecostal," in the sense of being affiliated with the Pentecostal Church, but rather being Pentecostal in the sense of being affected in the same way as Jesus' first disciples were affected. I make a distinction between a religious experience and a true Pentecostal experience. A religious experience can occur and be done with, even forgotten – you may have felt a warm fuzzy feeling at a youth retreat, but it came and went so quickly and these days you hardly remember it. There are churches that strive to give people a powerful religious experience, through music and lighting and powerful preaching, and all this might bring on a Pentecostal experience...but it may not. It may just bring on a religious experience, and that experience may or may not change a person's life, but a Pentecostal experience will forever change your life.

A Pentecostal experience sticks with you. Being born of the Holy Spirit kind of implies that you are living in the Spirit. Life follows birth; when a person is born in the flesh, life in the flesh follows. So it is with those who are born in the Spirit; life in the Spirit naturally follows birth in the Spirit. That's why I say that Pentecost is not a past event but an ongoing one. Pentecost was something that happened that caused a lot of other things to happen.

That's how I see the events that occurred on that first Pentecost nearly two thousand years ago. Something happened, which caused other things to happen. The disciples were hanging out in a room in Jerusalem fifty days after Easter. What were they doing? Praying mostly, but I think they were also puzzling. They had seen their master after his resurrection, and they were trying to figure out what that could mean. I like the way Matthew (28:17) describes one of those resurrection appearances where many disciples worshiped Jesus while some doubted. I think that's the way a lot of us have approached faith. We worship, but we have those nagging doubts.

And often those doubts increase as our fears increase. For the disciples, there was a real risk in going out and declaring that Jesus was alive, and so their minds led them to doubt whether Jesus really was alive or were they imagining things. It would have been a lot safer for them to NOT believe that Jesus was alive; if that were the case they would have nothing to proclaim; they could all go back home and start fishing or collecting taxes or whatever they did before, and no one would be out to get them. So they had to struggle with the reality of the resurrection and the danger that they would certainly face in proclaiming that resurrection.

And the danger was not simply in declaring that a condemned and crucified man was actually alive; the danger was in proclaiming the resurrection for what it truly meant; that Jesus was Savior of the world, and that God was the true ruler of this world, and that the kingdoms of this world were going to have to surrender to the authority of the one true God, that their days were numbered, and to proclaim that involved a lot of risk. Jesus had gone to his death proclaiming God's kingdom, and though he had risen from the dead, he had been treated rather badly and killed in a horrible way, and death wasn't something that the disciples really looked forward to. They liked Easter, but they weren't crazy about Good Friday, and they had this funny feeling that following their Master was going to get them into the same hot water that he had gotten into.

That's the same trepidation that we experience as disciples of Jesus; we have read Jesus' commandments for all who wish to follow him, and we realize the risk that's involved in following all those commandments - giving to those in need, turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, considering others more important than ourselves - and we realize that the cost is quite high for us. We're afraid of what all this might cost. Our fear is so strong that we brainwash ourselves, or allow ourselves to be brainwashed, into believing that God expects something less of us. "I'm only human" I've heard people say (and I've said it myself). If we declared to God, "I'm only human," God would immediately correct us and say that we should get rid of that word "only." God would say, "I created you in my image, and there is nothing 'only' about that." We are incredibly and wonderfully made, and we can do all things through the power of the Holy Spirit, through Pentecost Power. But we worry that saying what Jesus wants us to say and doing what Jesus wants us to do is too risky. We won't be able to live the way we've become accustomed to living. We won't feel as safe as we do now. But let me tell you that your safety comes with a price, just as it did for the disciples. They could remain safe, closed off in that Upper Room, or going back to their villages and fishing. But they would have to give up on God's kingdom. They would have to admit to themselves that Jesus was wrong, that God's kingdom had not really arrived, and that they were not commissioned with advancing that kingdom, with building the Church, that there must be someone else besides Jesus who is coming to establish God's kingdom, and meanwhile they would continue to live in bondage to whatever earthly rulers claimed power and authority over them. The disciples were paralyzed by the same fears that paralyze so many of us, that enslave us. That's right; our fears enslave us, and any thug knows that. Any bully banks on that; all a bully has to do is convince you that he has the power to squash you and intends to use that power if you don't meet his demands and you are enslaved to that bully. Bullies know that. Dictators know that. Violent criminals know that. Governments know that. So the disciples were in a quandary. They had seen their Risen Lord, but they still had fear of those in power. And so they stayed shackled up for fifty days figuring out what to do.

Then the Holy Spirit got hold of them and brought them out of hibernation and sent them babbling out into the street for the world to see. What exactly happened on Pentecost? I know the book of Acts presents it as something strange falling out of the sky, but I believe it was something strange coming right out of the disciples' own hearts. In essence it was faith. It was a faith that overcame their fears, because I believe that faith never really overcomes doubt, but it does overcome our fears. It was a faith that came through fervent prayers; Jesus had instructed the disciples to pray for the Holy Spirit, and it was their fervent prayers that brought them to a firm foundation of faith, and with that came the Holy Spirit.

The disciples found faith on Pentecost. Specifically they found faith in Jesus, and by that I mean that they had faith NOT just that Jesus had risen from the grave but they found faith in him as Savior of the world, as the one who had defeated the powers of sin and death and would come again to rule the world. And so these disciples took the proverbial LEAP OF FAITH and came out of hiding, declaring this new faith and shaking things up, even though it was risky. The disciples started living in the Spirit; they started living a Pentecostal lifestyle. They believed what Jesus had told them, that they had eternal life in him, and so they gathered enough courage to come out and start declaring the Kingdom of God, and they would keep declaring that kingdom for the rest of their lives.

That's why I say that the Pentecostal experience is more a Pentecostal lifestyle, life in the Spirit, life that is free of fear – though Jesus does cut us a little slack because we know that he sweat a bit in the garden just before his arrest, but he did end up doing what he had to do. A Pentecost Lifestyle is empowered by a faith in Jesus that is a faith in his identity (he is the Son of God) and faith in his victory (he has defeated sin and death) When those two facts sink in, our lives are truly changed, and we actually live life as God intends us to live life, that is, Life in the Spirit.

And when we live in the Spirit, it informs everything we do – when I say “informs,” I mean that in the sense that it “forms-in” us, that it shapes us. It shapes our relationships with others. It shapes our politics. It shapes the words that come of our mouths and the thoughts that spring out of our heads. The Spirit shapes our being, and we truly become NEW BEINGS in Jesus Christ.

But this is an ongoing process; it's not as if we suddenly lose all our fears and reservations about following Jesus. There are obstacles that we face, roads we're afraid to travel because of the dangers we may encounter. Our lives are filled with those “Upper Rooms” where we hide out of fear for what might happen if we venture out. And so I ask you this morning, what is the “upper room” that you are hiding in today? What is it that you are afraid of? Is it financial instability? Is it an addiction brought on by a desire to forget something bad from your past? Does this world suddenly seem so strange to you that you feel threatened by it, so that you're unwilling to embrace what is foreign to you? Is it a fear of how your friends or family or colleagues will look upon you if you say or do “the right thing”? We all have multiple fears, multiple “upper rooms” where we may be trapped by our own fears. I encourage you to share that fear with us, to ask others to pray for you as you pray for yourself. Ask for a Pentecostal experience that you may truly live a Pentecostal life.