

Hard on the heels of the Ascension—forty days after Easter—the church celebrates Pentecost—fifty days after Easter. The number fifty gives us its name. The paraments change to red. There are doves—for the Holy Spirit—and fire—for the reading from Acts 2—and even a few Reformation images reminding us of another Sunday in which the colors are red. Today is the festival of the Holy Spirit who is our Helper, our Comforter, our Paraclete.

The whole Pentecost story might seem a little strange to us, but the miraculous signs of Acts 2 were full of meaning for the first followers of Jesus Christ. Pentecost had been around since the days of Moses. It was instituted by God at the Exodus as the Feast of Weeks—7 weeks after Passover. And now, much like Passover, it was being realized—fulfilled in Jesus Christ—with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost was one of the great harvest festivals. And like many of the Old Testament holy days, it involved food—a covenant meal. Worshippers offered the first of the spring grain harvests before the Lord. This firstfruits offering acknowledged that God was the source of the food on their tables.

It was a time of worship at the temple. They sang the Psalms—in Hebrew—and the language is important—as we will see.

Everyone was in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Everyone celebrated. It was a central festival—a little like Christmas or Epiphany or Easter for us. You were expected to be there—even if just to keep up appearances—even if your religious life was shallow and insincere. We heard the reading from Acts with all of the different locations and languages that were represented. “Devout men from every nation under heaven.” And so, Israelites and converts from all over the Roman Empire gathered to make their offerings.

Pentecost served a second purpose. It was also a commemoration of the giving of the Law at Sinai. It was a covenant renewal ceremony. A whole series of passages from Exodus, Deuteronomy, and even the Chronicles build this connection. For many, this was their most important reason to gather.

The people remembered that God spoke on Mt. Sinai. He established His covenant with His chosen people. And it was a frightening and fantastic memory. After leading the people out of Egypt in glorious victory—with a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire—God now appeared before His chosen people.

The mountain trembled. The heavens were ablaze with cloud and thunder and lightning. His voice roared from above. And God warned them to keep their distance.

This was holy ground. This was the place of the burning bush where God had spoken with Moses. This was where God would speak to Elijah in the midst of a whirlwind. And all of these signs were related to God’s presence. The glory of God was revealed—as we talked about last week. The tabernacle flows out of this encounter—a place for Him to meet with His people.

So, this ragtag group of Jesus’ disciples—just a hundred and twenty in number—gather in Jerusalem for Pentecost. They sit and await the promise of the Father—with all of

this history behind them—with all of this anticipation. The stories of Moses, the burning bush, the Exodus, Mt. Sinai, the giving of the covenant, the glory filling the tabernacle and temple fill their minds.

And then, they have the promises of Jesus. In Acts 1, we hear, “And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, ‘you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’”

And the location for this event is the temple complex. They are gathered in an upper room—all together in one place. Jesus told them they would be granted the Spirit—power from above—to see the kingdom of God flourish in their hearts and lives.

And the Spirit comes to them just as Jesus promised. This is the beginning of the New Testament church. And signs accompany His coming. The signs of Pentecost. A mighty rushing wind fills the room—divided tongues like fire alight over each person—and God speaks. The Spirit enables the disciples to proclaim the mighty acts of God in tongues—in the languages of the nations.

Much has been made of this gift of tongues. People ask if they should expect the same experience? But, it’s the wrong question. That’s not the point of the sign. Sometimes I wish that our English translations would have just rendered the Greek word *tongues* as *languages*. It might have saved us a great deal of trouble. The same word appears in other contexts as *languages*.

For example, in Revelation 7, “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and *languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.”

Thus, in Acts, it should probably just read, “And they began to speak in other *languages* as the Spirit gave them utterance.” Tongues are not highly emotional unintelligible speech. And emotion is not the way we recognize the work of the Spirit, anyway. We don’t feel the Spirit’s presence—not necessarily. Tongues represent genuine languages—unknown to the speakers—clear to their hearers—as a sign of the Spirit’s work to come.

Jesus had announced in Acts 1 that His Spirit would enable His disciples to be His witnesses to the nations. The Holy Spirit would tear down barriers through the Gospel. Barriers that went all the way back to the curse at Babel in Genesis 11. Where the Lord confused their languages because of their grasping pride. Because they worshipped and served themselves.

And really, what greater sign could He have given? People gathered from all over the world in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Some have compared this list of hearers with the Table of the Nations in Genesis 10—just updated into the language of Jesus’ day. This was a diverse group.

And they heard the disciples glorifying God in their local dialects. I am sure it was quite shocking. They understood every word. And the people were unnerved by this whole thing. It is not what they were expecting at Pentecost—although maybe they should have been. It is what Pentecost was all about. Some were amazed. Others mocked.

But Peter explains what is going on here. And really, this is the work of the Spirit. Not just some emotional experience that makes no difference in your life—but clear proclamation. When the Spirit comes, a sermon breaks out.

Peter points the people to Joel 2. The prophet anticipated this very moment. He addresses the question of the significance of tongues. The Pentecost event fulfills Joel's prophecy about God empowering His people to speak as the Spirit would inspire them.

The Prophet said, "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit."

And it's happening right in front of them. God is pouring out His Spirit. God speaks to His people. The end times are upon them. The last days have been inaugurated. And thus, the era of salvation has come. God will bring the full revelation of Jesus Christ to their generation through the Holy Spirit.

It is an interesting study to look through the New Testament with the question, "What is the role of the Spirit?" What is He sent to do? The answer to that question would take weeks to unravel. I won't do that to you today. Although reading the New Testament with that question in mind would keep us from many of the theological errors that swirl around the person and work of the Holy Spirit today.

Let me just mention two purposes of the Holy Spirit that arise from Scripture—one rather obvious—one a little more obscure. First, the Spirit is our *Helper*. We heard from Jesus in John 14 a few weeks ago. And in this context, He says, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

The Greek word translated as *Helper* here is *Paraclete*. It means something like *advocate* or *representative*. And here, the Spirit helps us with something very specific. Primarily, this passage defines the inspiration of the Scriptures. The Spirit inspires the apostolic witness about Jesus Christ—in language we can understand.

In fact, the sign of tongues is one of the proofs for divine inspiration. And it is about what Peter preaches in Acts 2—telling the story of Jesus in light of the Scriptures. The Spirit kept the words and works of Jesus intact and inerrant in the hearts and minds of the Apostles—so that they could record that Word for us.

Thus, the Spirit brings the truth to us. He sets it before our eyes in the Holy Scriptures. He puts it in our ears in His holy Church. And He brings it to mind, convicting us of sin, pointing us to righteousness, and teaching us right doctrine—giving us clarity on the things of God. With the giving of the Spirit, we step forward towards the day when people from every nation, tribe, and language will—with one voice—proclaim the mighty works of God.

Second—the Spirit is with us. Jesus even seems to think that this is better for His followers than it was during His earthly ministry. Now, believers experienced the Spirit's work before Pentecost—even before the incarnation. His work goes back to creation. Saving faith is impossible apart from the Spirit's work. But at Pentecost, something new is happening regarding the Spirit's presence with the Church.

Let me draw on John 14 once again. Here Jesus says, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

Acts 2 reminds us that all were filled with the Spirit as they began to speak in new languages. The mysterious windstorm and fire were external—in a sense. But the miraculous speaking was more personal. It was due to the inward presence of the Spirit. Every word was an immediate gift of the Spirit. Tongues were a sign to the church—and even to the world—that the Spirit was present with His people—and even in His people.

That presence is still real today. Baptism grants the presence of the Spirit in the hearts of all who will believe. It is as Peter says in Acts 2, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Baptism is our sign of the Spirit’s presence. All those who are baptized—and believe—and continue to believe—have the Spirit—and in full measure. Water Baptism is Spirit Baptism—we need seek no fuller experience of what the Spirit gives.

But let me make one last clarification. The Acts miracle wasn’t necessarily repeatable. Like all the other miracles in Scriptures, it was given at a crucial time to point out what God was doing in the world. And so that we would listen to the preaching of Jesus—and the Prophets and Apostles.

It was never intended to be normative for the church. Just because we see something take place in Scripture, we shouldn’t think that it is always available—or that it is chiefly for our own personal experience. Elisha called bears out of the woods to attack his young assailants. We shouldn’t expect to be able to summon wild beasts anytime we are having trouble with our neighbors.

The tongues—the languages—of Acts 2 were a sign gift. They point back to the ways in which God has worked among His people in the past—at the burning bush, the Exodus, Sinai, the tabernacle, the temple—undoing the curse of Babel. This sign fulfills all that Pentecost—the Feast of Weeks—was intended to foreshadow.

And the Pentecost miracle speaks to a new age of the work of the Spirit among us as God’s elect people. He is claiming a people for Himself from every nation, from all tribes and *languages*. The church begins at Pentecost under a New Covenant in Jesus’ blood.

God gives us His Spirit—our Helper—our Paraclete—who is with us and in us. He points us to Jesus. He reveals Jesus to us through the Holy Scriptures. He makes Christ present to us at the Altar. And as we are looking at Jesus—when we are listening to Him—the Spirit has promised to work. And suddenly, we find that the change that happened with the Apostles at Pentecost is starting to get into us as well. Pentecost is our holy day. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+