

“To Be with You Forever”

Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17, 25-27

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Pentecost

When I was a young Christian I did not understand that Pentecost was a Jewish celebration before it was a Christian one. I didn't have a good understanding of why there were all those people in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles. I just assumed that the events that are recorded in Acts 2 are what gave birth to the annual Christian festival we call Pentecost. I was wrong.

I've been wrong about a lot of things over the years, of course. We all have. One of the marks of a faithful Christian life is that we keep striving to grow, keep trying to learn, keep endeavoring to increase our understanding of the historic Christian faith, keep deepening our relationship with God.

So let's take another look at Pentecost, and see if we can clear up any misconceptions that any of you may have. The word “Pentecost” means “fiftieth;” it marks the fiftieth day after – wait, the fiftieth day after *what*? After Easter? Well, yes, for us Christians, if you count Easter as day #1, then Pentecost would be day #50. But when the Jews of Jesus' day used the term “Pentecost,” they were not referring to the 50th day after Easter. They were referring to the fiftieth day after *Passover*. There was a Jewish festival that took place 50 days after Passover, year after year. It was a harvest festival, occurring at the beginning of the wheat harvest, in late spring or early summer. In Hebrew, it was called “Shavuot;” in most English translations of the Bible, it is called “the Feast of Weeks,” because they would count exactly seven weeks after the beginning of Passover. There are regulations about it in the Old Testament. It was one of the three annual Jewish pilgrimage festivals; Jews were expected to make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate it. Jews had been celebrating this festival for hundreds and hundreds of years. When the use of the Greek language became widespread, in the couple hundred years before Jesus, the festival came to be called *Pentecoste*, the Greek word for “fiftieth.” If you own a Bible that contains the Apocryphal books – the additional books that are recognized by the Catholic and Orthodox churches – you can actually find a couple references to Pentecost in the Old Testament. My point is – *this was not a new festival*. The early Christians did not *create* the festival of Pentecost. They just *adapted* it ... to commemorate what happened on one *particularly significant* day of Pentecost.

Jerusalem was flooded with visitors. Jews had come from far and wide – from all over the Roman Empire – to celebrate Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks. That's why the Acts 2 reading has all those names – “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia,” and all the rest. Pentecost was a *big deal*. Jews had traveled *hundreds of miles*, by land or by sea, to be in Jerusalem for the festival.

But meanwhile ... among the Jews staying in Jerusalem was a relatively small band of people who had faithfully followed Jesus, only about a hundred and twenty of them in all. That was all that was

left of the huge crowds that had followed Jesus from Galilee. There were the twelve disciples (minus Judas Iscariot), plus certain prominent women (among them Mary the mother of Jesus), several other members of Jesus' own family, and a variety of other people. One of them was a man named Matthias, who had been chosen to replace Judas. Jesus had been killed about seven weeks earlier, during the festival of Passover. He had returned to life, and had appeared to them for a period of 40 days. But then he had left them – for a second time – this time ascending into heaven. But before he had gone, he had told them to remain in Jerusalem, to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” said Jesus, “is what you have heard from me ... you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” They didn't entirely understand what Jesus meant, and one of them had asked, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus had replied: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And then Jesus had gone, ascended into heaven, and the disciples had been left with those cryptic words, with the expectation that *something* was going to happen. Something ... *soon*.

The morning of Pentecost dawns. The hundred and twenty disciples of Jesus gather together in a single room in Jerusalem. It was, in all likelihood, the exact same room where the disciples had their Last Supper with Jesus, less than two months earlier. One of the disciples must have owned that room, the “upper room,” and possibly the whole building it was in. They were probably planning on taking part in the normal harvest festival events like all the other Jews in Jerusalem. But *God* had other plans.

First they *heard* something – “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” – filling the entire room. Then they *saw* something – “divided tongues, as of fire,” with a tongue resting on each of them. In traditional Christian art depicting this event, the disciples all have little flames of fire just over their heads. Then they *experienced* something – “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” They were speaking in *real* languages, *human* languages, the languages of all the peoples. A great crowd of people hears the commotion coming through the open windows, and they rush to the side of the building, where they hear *intelligible words*, spoken in their own native languages. They are “amazed and perplexed.” Simon Peter stands up at the windows with the other eleven apostles and explains: this is the fulfillment of a prophecy from the biblical book of Joel: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” That is what has happened: God has poured out his holy Spirit on that little band of disciples. Peter seizes the opportunity to tell them about Jesus, about his death, and his resurrection, and his exaltation at the right hand of God. “Therefore,” says Peter, “let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Peter calls on them to repent and be baptized, so their sins may be forgiven, and so that they too may receive the Holy Spirit of God. “For,” says Peter, “the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” Many in the crowd took his words to heart. That very day, *three thousand people* were baptized, received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and joined the church.

That is the event we Christians commemorate on Pentecost: the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the church. Pentecost started out as a Jewish festival, but we Christians celebrate it because of what happened on *one particular* Pentecost: the Holy Spirit descended ... and the church was born.

But what happened that Pentecost *continues* to happen, at least in part, every single time another person comes to faith in Jesus Christ and joins the church. For what the disciples received on

that day was not unique to *them*. The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to *us* as well. God *continues* to pour out the Holy Spirit on people far and wide. “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God,” wrote the apostle Paul, and he wasn’t just talking about those 120 disciples in the upper room, or about the 3000 who came to faith on that day. He was talking about *everyone* who places their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, in *every* place, in *every* time. When you came to faith in Jesus, you received “a spirit of adoption;” you became a child of God, you became an inheritor of God’s promises, and the glory of God. The Holy Spirit of God lives and moves in our midst today; recently it led five people to join the membership of this congregation, and two of our youth to be baptized. We witnessed all of that. We might not have been able to see tongues of fire, we might not have heard the rush of a mighty wind, but we could all *feel* the way the Holy Spirit was moving in these people’s lives. Perhaps there are others sitting here today whom the Spirit is stirring even now. This Holy Spirit is a gift from God, a gift that will be with us *forever*. Jesus said as much; he told his disciples, “the Father ... will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.... You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” Not just today, not just tomorrow, but *forever*, no matter what trials or adversities will come your way. The Holy Spirit is *with you now*, will *never* leave or abandon you.

Which is why you all shouldn’t worry about the fact that I will be absent from your midst for the next three months. For any who have not heard, I will be on leave, beginning tomorrow and continuing through early September. Most of you received a mailing this week with some more details about that leave, including a worship schedule for the entire summer. If you didn’t receive the mailing, we have extra copies; they’ll be sitting over by the office door after worship. You’re going to have some great preachers standing here in this pulpit. We’ve also got two pastors lined up to help for emergency situations, and one who will be providing some administrative support for the next three months.

We’ve gone to a lot of effort to make sure that most aspects of the ministry of this church will continue. But still, some may be feeling some apprehension. “How are we going to manage without Bill?” When Session met a week ago, there were a lot of questions like this: “What are we going to do if *that* happens?” Okay, folks, remember ... you’ve got the *Holy Spirit!* What do you need *me* for?!?

Sure, I do some things around here. Just a few. But so do lots of other people. How many Elders do we have around here? How many Deacons? Raise your hand if you’ve ever been ordained as an Elder. Raise your hand if you’ve ever been ordained as a Deacon. Look at all those hands! You’ve got all these people, all blessed with particular gifts, *and* you’ve got the Holy Spirit! Seriously – I firmly believe that you will be *just fine* without me for three months. *You’ve got the Holy Spirit! It’s still here! It’s not going anywhere!* Remember what Jesus said: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.... You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” Let that sink in. *The Holy Spirit abides with you! The Holy Spirit is IN YOU!*

I have one final thing I want to say to you today. I want to *bless* you. I want to bless you with one of the oldest blessings in the Bible, the blessing that the priests used to bless the people of Israel:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, *who abides with you ... amen!*

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