

“I Will Put My Spirit Within You, And You Shall Live”

Acts 2:1-21 • Ezekiel 37:1-14 • Psalm 104:24-34, 35b • Romans 8:22-27 • John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

May 19, 2024

The Day of Pentecost

The celebration of Pentecost comes around for us Christians once a year. But Pentecost was a Jewish celebration long before it was a Christian one. It was originally a Jewish harvest festival, one of the three great “pilgrimage festivals” in the Bible, when all Israelites who were able were expected to come to Jerusalem for the celebration. It took place exactly fifty days after Passover, when the Israelites commemorated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt by the hand of God. They called it Shavuot, which means “Weeks,” because they counted a time span of seven weeks following Passover. It was a springtime festival, marking the end of the grain harvest, which began with the barley harvest at Passover and ended with the wheat harvest at Shavuot. In the Hebrew calendar, it would occur on the sixth day of the month of Sivan, which could fall anywhere between May 15 and June 14. To this day, observant Jews still celebrate the festival of Shavuot, often by reading a special liturgical poem during the morning synagogue service, consuming dairy products like milk and cheese, reading the Book of Ruth, decorating homes and synagogues with greenery, and engaging in all-night Torah study.

The festival of Shavuot is mandated in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and originated during the time of Moses. There were lengthy stretches of ancient Israelite history when it was not faithfully observed; a lot depended on who was governing Israel at the time and how strictly they were expecting the Israelites to follow the Law of Moses. But during the time of Jesus, it was in full swing, and Jews from all over the Roman world flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot year after year. By that point it had acquired the Greek name “Pentecost,” which means “fiftieth.” The first references to “Pentecost” show up in the apocryphal books of Tobit and 2 Maccabees, a couple centuries before Jesus.

So Jews had been celebrating Pentecost for *hundreds of years* before Jesus. We Christians celebrate Pentecost seven weeks after Easter because of something remarkable that happened on *one particular* day of Pentecost, the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Book of Acts describes what happened: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” The word “they” refers to the small band of about 120 people, mostly Jews, who had followed Jesus and who now worshiped him. Among them were eleven of the original twelve apostles (everyone but Judas Iscariot), Matthias (who replaced Judas), an otherwise unknown disciple named Joseph Barsabbas (also called Justus), Mary (the mother of Jesus), and probably a number of other followers of Jesus who are mentioned in the Gospels. These 120-or-so devotees of Jesus had been praying and worshipping together in the ten days since his ascension, and now they were celebrating Pentecost together, while all around them, throughout the whole city of Jerusalem, Jews from all over the world were doing the same. But in *this particular* room – possibly the same room where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper – something *remarkable* happened. It began with a *sound*: “a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” which “filled the

entire house where they were sitting.” It continued with a *sight*: “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.” It culminated in a *gift*: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” These 120 disciples of Jesus were “speaking in tongues,” as it is now called. That does not mean they were speaking gibberish. No, God had granted them the ability to speak in *other languages that they did not know*. It would be like if you suddenly gained the ability to speak in Mandarin, or Hindi, or Arabic, or Urdu.

The words these disciples suddenly speak carry out through the windows. Foreign Jews on nearby streets and in nearby homes hear these people speaking in their *native* languages. A crowd gathers, “amazed,” “astonished,” and “perplexed.” The apostles step outside. Peter addresses the crowd, declaring that this is the fulfillment of an ancient Jewish prophecy from the book of Joel: “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.” That prophecy culminates in these words: “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Peter preaches, telling the crowd about Jesus, explaining that he is indeed the long-expected Messiah. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus is proof of that. Three thousand people are persuaded; they are baptized, and they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The fellowship of disciples grows by 2500%! It was the most successful sermon in the history of the church; I’ve never preached anything like it; not even Billy Graham was that good! So we celebrate Pentecost every year, seven weeks after Easter, to remember what happened that day.

Joel was one prophet who spoke about the Holy Spirit; Ezekiel was another. Ezekiel lived in the sixth century before Christ; he was carried off to Babylon with many other Israelites after the Babylonian conquest of Israel. He had some visions while in exile. In one of them, he sees himself in a valley filled with human bones. God invites him to speak to the bones, causing them to be re-formed into skeletons, which then grow tissue and organs and flesh. They look like human beings, but they are not yet alive. God instructs Ezekiel to “prophesy to the breath,” calling the breath of God into them. Remember, in Hebrew, the words for “breath” and “spirit” are interchangeable. God is telling Ezekiel to call upon the *Spirit of God* to embody and empower these humans. As Ezekiel speaks, so it happens: “the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.” The Holy Spirit of God has given them *life*. That vision was given to encourage Ezekiel and his listeners to know that God would restore the Jewish people. It’s a vision that brought *hope* to the exiles. But the vision also reminds us of the vital importance of the *Holy Spirit of God*. It’s the Spirit that gives us *life*.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit “the Advocate,” literally in Greek “the Paraclete.” A *paraclete* is someone who is *called to one’s aid*, like a *counselor* or a *comforter*, a *helper* or an *assistant*, an *intercessor* or an *advocate*. The word *describes what the Holy Spirit does*. The Holy Spirit *counsels* us, *comforts* us, *helps* us, *assists* us, *intercedes* for us, *advocates* for us. Those are all people we would happily have by our side, right? Sometimes we pay good money for people who do things like that for us. The Holy Spirit does them *for free*. Jesus makes it clear that he – Jesus – *will send us this Advocate from God*. We have access to this Advocate *through Jesus*. This Advocate would only come *after* Jesus had returned to his Father. There’s a reason why Pentecost comes *after* the Ascension of Christ; *Jesus had to return to God first*, and *then* he could send the Advocate to be with us, in his stead. In our Christian calendar, following the timeline given in the Bible, we celebrate the Ascension forty days after Easter, and then, ten days later, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, on the Day of Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit came to those first Christians on the day of Pentecost in about the year 30 AD, and the Holy Spirit *continues* to come to us Christians today. The Holy Spirit has come upon Christian after Christian for nearly *two thousand years* now. That first outpouring of the Holy Spirit resulted in their being able to speak in other languages. Other passages in the New Testament – Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and 28-30; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 4:11 – name a *variety* of gifts that the Spirit gives, including the gift of teaching, the gift of service, the gift of healing, the gift of mercy, and many others. About 30 different spiritual gifts are mentioned or alluded to in the Bible. An example of one that is implied is the gift of *artistic creativity*. Every Christian – each of us! – has been given a *few* spiritual gifts – one, two, maybe three. I don't have the gift of *healing*, for example, or the gift of *tongues*, but maybe the Spirit gave me the gift of *teaching*. All of us have been given *something* by the Holy Spirit; part of our job as Christians is *figure out what that gift is*, and use it for the benefit of other people. I've taught a class on "discovering your spiritual gifts" a few times before; maybe it's time to do it again.

The Holy Spirit also serves as a *guide for our daily living*. We don't have the luxury of talking with Jesus face-to-face, in person, the way the followers of Jesus in the Gospels did. But we do have the luxury of receiving guidance from the God's Holy Spirit. How do we do that? How do you know when the nudge you are getting is truly coming from *God*, and not just your imagination, or some random voice in your head that says "you *should*"? When you're making decisions about relationships, or what to do about your job, or how to respond to all the various pressures and challenges that are coming your way, or just simply how to spend your time, how do you listen to *the Spirit*? There are a variety of ways; I want to share with you one that has helped *me*. There is a pair of questions you can ask yourself at the end of each day: "For what moment today am I most grateful?", together with "For what moment today am I *least* grateful?" There are other ways to frame that. "When did I give and receive the most love today?", and "When did I give and receive the *least* love today?" Or: "When did I feel the most *alive* today?", and "When did I most feel life draining out of me?" Or: "When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God, and the universe?", and "When did I have the *least* sense of belonging?" Or: "When was I happiest today?", and "When was I saddest?" Or simply: "What was today's high point?", and "What was today's low point?" Pick one of those pairs of questions, and then ask them at the end of each day, for a period of time. *The Holy Spirit is telling you something in your answers to those questions*. Listen for what that might be. You will find yourself making adjustments to your life based on your answers. You will start trying to maximize your feelings of *gratitude*, your sense of *belonging*, your sense of being *alive*, your feelings of *joy*. And you will look for ways to minimize all the negative stuff in your life that isn't *of God*. You will gain some clarity about where the Holy Spirit is trying to lead you. If you want a fuller explanation, pick up a copy of the book *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*, by Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn, which is where those questions come from. Their book is based on a Christian practice that dates back centuries. The authors write: "We have given retreats in over forty countries, and we find that regardless of culture or age group, this simple process is the most helpful way for people to hear the voice of God guiding them from within." From the question "Should I change my job?" to the question "What can help me with my depression?", people who spend time with these simple questions often find answers to the *big* questions in their life.

The Holy Spirit came *first* on that Pentecost day long ago. The Holy Spirit *still comes today*. Speaking, gifting, inviting us to *live*. "I will put my Spirit within you," God said, "and you shall *live*!"

© 2024 Rev. Bill Pinches