

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Festival of Pentecost
May 28, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
How powerfully the Spirit works!

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the rushing of a violent wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw divided tongues that were like fire resting on each one of them. ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, since the Spirit was giving them the ability to speak fluently.

⁵ Now there were godly Jewish men from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ When this sound was heard, a crowd came together and was confused, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ They were completely baffled and said to each other, “Look, are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them speaking in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, and of Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya around Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes; ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring in our own languages the wonderful works of God.” ¹² They were all amazed and perplexed. They kept saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others mocked them and said, “They are full of new wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and spoke loudly and clearly to them: “Men of Judea, and all you residents of Jerusalem, understand this, and listen closely to my words. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ On the contrary, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ This is what God says will happen in the last days: I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. ¹⁹ I will show wonders in the sky above, and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a rising cloud of smoke. ²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. ²¹ And this will happen: Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

—Acts 2:1-21

The Festival of Pentecost is the third great festival of the Christian church year, but it's the one most likely to be forgotten. Our culture loves Christmas, but Pentecost doesn't come with Christmas decorations and gift exchanges. We love to say, “Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!” and we flock to church on Easter to hear of Jesus' resurrection. But Pentecost is often pushed to the sidelines. When Pentecost falls on Memorial Day weekend, church attendance is down. Pentecost is often an afterthought. Yet I could make the case that of the three Christian festivals Pentecost is the first and the foremost. The first Christmas was announced by angels and celebrated by a few shepherds. The first Easter was a day of confusion. But the first Christian Pentecost was a day of power, visible, obvious, life-changing power. It was the birthday of the Christian Church, the day when God the Holy Spirit transformed twelve timid apostles into bold witnesses to Jesus, the Son of God, the day when the Church grew by 3,000 souls, the day when people from around the world heard the Good News in their own language and carried the gospel back to their home countries, so the Christian Church spread and grew. Pentecost was the day when the Holy Spirit was poured out in transforming power. It is because of Pentecost and because of the Spirit's power that we can celebrate Christmas with purpose and Easter with joy.

Today we think of Pentecost as a Sunday celebration for Christians, but the day of Pentecost went back 1,500 years before Christ to the time of Moses (Exodus 23). The Jewish Pentecost (called *Shavuot*) came 50 days after the Jewish Passover. It was one of three holidays when all observant Jews were to make their way to Jerusalem. No wonder the city was packed for the festival with people from all over the Roman Empire! No wonder God chose this day to make the gospel of Jesus known in power!

In our reading from Acts we heard what happened on that first Pentecost of the New Testament. Ten days earlier, Jesus' disciples had stood on a hill east of Jerusalem and watched as their rabbi blessed them and ascended into heaven, and a cloud hid him from their sight. Following Jesus' instructions, they returned to the city of Jerusalem to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Ten days after Jesus' ascension, the time came. There was a sound like a rushing wind where the apostles were gathered. Tongues of fire appeared and rested on each of them. They spoke in other languages, so that the people who were in Jerusalem from many other places could hear the Good News in their own tongues. Peter delivered a powerful message of conviction and comfort. He told the assembled crowd, “With the help of wicked men, you put Jesus of Nazareth to death, nailing him to a cross. But God raised him from the dead. Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.” Peter pleaded with the people, “Be saved from this corrupt generation!” And about 3,000 new souls came into the Christian Church.

With such power the Holy Spirit works! *Pentecostal* power! It is the power to convict of sin, the power to comfort and heal, the power to transform lives. The first New Testament Pentecost was nearly 2,000 years ago, but the power of the Holy Spirit to do exactly the same things is still on display in powerful ways today. But the Holy Spirit is known as the quiet person of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit places the spotlight on Jesus and brings comfort by showing us that Jesus has taken our sins away and made us right with God.

I remember a few years ago when I went to an NBA pro basketball game. As we were settling in and waiting for the game to start, the lights went down, driving music started, strobe lights started going off, laser beams started dancing in every direction all over the stadium space. It was intentional. The whole purpose was to get the crowd into the spirit of the game, to whip them up into an emotional frenzy. As I'm participating and getting revved up with the crowd, I thought, "This is what we are expected to compete with in the Christian Church." In our culture people expect that they will be driven to an emotional apex, dazzled by the lights and sounds, captivated by the excitement. Our culture does everything possible to feed the desire of our flesh to make it all about me, all about how I feel, all about whether something is fun and exciting, or not. With that expectation, why wouldn't someone walk into church, plop into a pew, and say, "Okay, here I am . . . Entertain me!" Why wouldn't someone go "church shopping" to find the church that is the prettiest or the most friendly or the most lively or the most exciting? And with that expectation if they don't "feel the Spirit" and feel elevated, why wouldn't they go shopping for a church that delivers what they're looking for? Who wants a church that's boring? Stimulate me! Set me on fire!

Except the Spirit's work has never been to entertain us or to excite us. His work is to convict us of our sin and to comfort us with our Savior. It's always been that way. It was that way on that first New Testament Pentecost. The tongues of fire were a miraculous display that testified to the presence of the Spirit, and the speaking in tongues was a means of delivering the message of the Spirit. But the Spirit worked by convicting and comforting with the Word that was preached! Peter's sermon cut the people to the heart. He showed them that they had killed the Son of God. The long-expected, chosen Messiah had come, and the people put him to death. Peter led the people to repent by showing them their sin. Then he showed them Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead. God used Jesus' innocent death to pay the price for the world's sin, and God raised Jesus from the dead to show that the price was paid and accepted. The Spirit convicted, and the Spirit comforted through the Word that was preached. Then, as people came forward to be baptized, and they received the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit convicted, and the Spirit comforted through the sacrament of Baptism. How powerfully the Spirit worked on that first Christian Pentecost through Word and Sacrament!

So here's my question for you today: Are you a pentecostal Christian? What do I mean by that? Do I mean, do you speak in tongues? Do you roll in the aisles when you're "slain by the Spirit"? Do you possess charismatic gifts of miracles and healing? No, that's not what I mean. I mean, are you a Christian who loves and cherishes the Word of God and his Sacraments? Do you love the law of God when it convicts you of sin and leads you to repent of it? Do you love the preaching of the forgiveness of sins that give you comfort and hope? Do you love the law of God that guides you in this life? Do you cherish the gospel of Jesus Christ that fills you and empowers you every day? Do you live each day in the power of your Baptism and crave the taste of Jesus' holy Supper? Then you're a pentecostal Christian, a Lutheran Christian, who is filled with the Spirit and says, "How powerfully the Spirit works! How powerfully the Spirit works in me!"

There are churches today that claim to be "pentecostal" churches, and they may claim to speak in tongues, but I have never heard of someone person taking the gospel to Japan or to Kenya or to India or to Saudi Arabia and speaking the native language without ever studying it—the way the apostles did on Pentecost. Can the Spirit work through tongues and miracles and healing today? Of course, God can do whatever he wants! But charismatic gifts are very rare in the history of the Church, and after the time of the apostles such gifts became rarer still. What God has told us he wants to do is to work through instruments, through means—through the gospel in Word and Sacrament—and through the gospel to unleash all the power of the Spirit.

I have seen the Holy Spirit work—so have you! The Spirit works quietly but oh so powerfully! An infant is placed under the water of Baptism, and in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that child is adopted into the family of God. Sin is washed away, and another soul is born again of water and the Word. Do you know the power it takes for the Spirit to do that? We think that planting faith in a human heart is an easy thing—maybe we've bought into the myth that we can come to faith in Jesus by ourselves (as so many churches today teach), or at least we can cooperate with God in the process. But when we understand that the unbelieving, sinful mind is hostile toward God (Romans 8:7), that a human being is naturally dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1), and we realize that the Spirit of God works in us and draws us kicking and screaming into the kingdom of God *against* our will. Whether it's a newly baptized child, or any Christian, or me—how powerfully the Spirit worked to bring us from eternal death to life!

When the Word of God is preached and shared, whether it's in a far-off land, or right around the corner here in Tempe, and people hear it and believe it and repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as their Savior—and it happens all over again and again, just like it did on that Pentecost long ago—how powerfully the Spirit works still today!

When we look at the world around us with all its challenges to our faith in Jesus, when Satan throws everything at you to try to get you to turn away from Christ your Savior and follow him into the pit of hell, be it the allurements of material wealth, the seduction of sex, the enticement of logic and reason and science—whatever!—and in the face of every challenge to your faith and every temptation that you face, you keep on repenting and turning away from sin and you keep on clinging to Jesus for the blessed hope of eternal life—how powerfully the Spirit works to keep you in the one true faith!

When you feel empty, cold, afraid, filled with doubts, uncertain . . . When you wonder, “What am I doing here? What meaning does my life have?” . . . When you wonder if God even knows or cares what you’re feeling, and the Holy Spirit fixes your gaze on Jesus and points you to the Son of God who gave his life for you as the seal of his love for you, and the Spirit reminds you of your identity, your purpose in Christ, your meaning as a child of God—how powerfully the Spirit works in you to give you a reason to get up in the morning and live for him!

When we come to Jesus weary and burdened with the weight of the sins of another tough week, and Jesus calls us to himself to refresh us and give rest to our souls, and we taste in Communion the true body that was slain on the cross and raised to life on Easter, and we drink of the true blood of the New Covenant that was poured out for the forgiveness of our sins, and the burden of another tough week is lifted, and our hearts are at rest, and we can depart the Lord’s Table in peace—how powerfully the Spirit works to forgive and to heal!

When our last hour of life finally comes, and as we are in the throes of death Satan again unleashes all his fury to try to fill us with doubt and fear, and in the time of our greatest need we remember the Word of God—the Lord’s Prayer, our confirmation passage, a special psalm—and the peace that passes all understanding floods over us, as we say, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.” And we fall asleep in Jesus as *pentecosta!* Christians, confident in the Word and comforted by the Sacrament—how powerfully the Spirit works in our final hour to deliver us from this valley of tears into the glorious bliss of heaven!

And the peace of God that transcends all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus! Amen.