

FIRST LESSON: Numbers 11:24-30  
SECOND LESSON: Acts 2:1-21  
May 28, 2023

## **“Pentecost”**

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A group were tasked with changing a lightbulb:

- The Roman Catholic refused; she prefers candles.
- The Christian Scientist said he can't, but he prays for the light to turn back on.
- The Episcopalian changes the lightbulb while her friends say how much they preferred the old one.
- The Mormon tries to change it as his five wives tell him how to do it right.
- The Presbyterian changes the lightbulb after getting it approved by three committees.
- The Charismatic changes it easily; his hands were already up.

Charismatic and Pentecostal. Both refer to churches that focus on the work of the Holy Spirit and the experience of the Spirit. But Pentecost is a birthday, the birthday of the Church. Why did God choose this day? Unlike some births this one was definitely planned for its deep symbolic meaning. The word “Pentecost” means “fifty,” which doesn’t make much sense to us, but it is a Jewish holiday coming fifty days after Passover. Basically, Pentecost is a week of weeks. Originally it was a festival marking the first grain harvest, a “first fruits” celebration. At a later point a new meaning was added. The Law was given to Moses at this time of the year, so Pentecost also came to be a festival of thanksgiving for the Torah. God chose an existing holy day, this one in particular, for the Church to be born.

The parallels are there for us to see if we pay attention. If Pentecost is about first fruits, in the Christian celebration of Pentecost the first fruits of the kingdom of God came in the form of the thousands who came to faith that day. And as Christians we celebrate Jesus the Living Word who in his person replaced the Law as a means of restoring us to God.

But Pentecost, as we all know, is also about the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Pentecost is outrageously miraculous. Pentecost, in fact, is so unlike the Presbyterian Church that when I was a little girl and heard ministers preach about it, I was confused, because I certainly didn’t see any of *that* going on on a Sunday morning. They were all talking about it in church, and six-year-old me was looking up at all these old men in suits and ladies with big hats and thinking, *“I can’t see that happening here.”*

The Holy Spirit has always been present in the world, even and maybe especially where we can’t see it. The Spirit hovered over the waters in creation. The Spirit came upon Moses and upon the elders he selected to help him

govern. And the Spirit came upon the prophets giving them words to speak. In all of these circumstances the main identifying feature of being filled with the Spirit was verbal. They spoke. They spoke prophetically, which does not mean fortune-telling, but rather forth-telling. They spoke what God wanted said. And on this particular morning, they spoke what God wanted said in languages they did not know.

Being good Jews, the disciples had been up all night reading scripture and praying on the eve of Pentecost. About 9 in the morning, something happened. There are no adequate words to describe it. A sound like a rushing wind was heard, and tongues “as of fire” settled on the people. They found themselves overwhelmed with joy and compelled to preach the good news of Jesus to all of the visitors in Jerusalem. But it was when they opened their mouths that the most amazing thing happened. They started proclaiming the good news, in languages they did not know. Jews from all over the world heard about Jesus in their native languages. Of course, when many people speak at once it can sound like babbling to those who do not take the time to listen and so some dismissed them as drunk at nine o'clock in the morning.

Despite the fact that speaking in tongues still happens, there are no other documented occasions of congregations proclaiming the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit to complete strangers in their own languages. Occasionally claims are made that a person spoke in tongues in a known language. But essentially the first Pentecost was a unique event. It was the birth of the Church. Pentecost is for the whole church, not just for Pentecostal churches or charismatic mega-churches. In fact, sometimes these churches go against the Spirit of Pentecost.

There is a new documentary out about the huge international church known as Hillsong. Hillsong began in Australia and now has branches throughout the world. I have not seen the documentary, but I have read about it. Once again, we have a series of celebrity style pastors who use their personal charisma in ways that abuse and exploit. There is infidelity. There is corruption. There are allegations of fraud and exploitation of workers. And once again, as in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, there is hidden child abuse.

But Hillsong is a charismatic church! People pray in tongues every Sunday. They praise God with hands raised singing their hearts out to the best and newest praise music. We sing some of their music! It's good! They believe in miracles and healing and a rather literal interpretation of the bible.

Unfortunately, Hillsong and churches like it disguise authoritarianism in a swirl of good music and informal clothes. They are accountable to no one. But the services are exciting. They're more like concerts. They use young attractive male pastors who wear jeans to preach and present themselves like ordinary people with a dash of celebrity. Essentially these churches create a fake Pentecost every Sunday. They provide people with an emotional high that passes itself off as a spiritual high. Then, they pass the offering plate around three times.

Presbyterians do not make the headlines in the way Hillsong has because we were created with a deliberate inbuilt system of accountability. It was Presbyterians who designed the American system of checks and balances. We

know too much about human nature to trust it. But unfortunately, we're not known for exciting worship either. Except here of course. The worship team here is **amazing**, right Frank?

God does move in miraculous ways, but God refuses to be scheduled. That is awkward for people who build churches through excitement. People might advertise revivals with "Miracles Every Night!" but God never committed to that. I remember my brother Chuck telling me a number of years ago when he did the sound and light for a three-day Pentecostal revival how he saw people going around quietly listening in on conversations and transmitting that information to those on stage, who then a few moments later would "be led by the Spirit" to say that there was a person in this section over here who had this specific need or condition. Everyone was then amazed at how powerfully the Holy Spirit was working through the man up front. **The Holy Spirit had nothing to do with it.**

The Church cannot grow without the work of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit can't be forced to do anything. The Holy Spirit is in charge. We are not. When we are filled with the Spirit we are directed toward the mission of the Spirit—to bring light into darkness, healing to the wounded, comfort to those who are hurting, and sometimes, to confront those who abuse and oppress others. We are to defend those who cannot defend themselves, and speak for those who have no voice. That is what Jesus did.

Christianity is not a spectator sport. We have been given the awesome responsibility of *reaching out* to the society we live in with the good news of God's love in Christ. And we don't need to wait for the Church leadership to organize something to do it! We should be actively serving Christ every day of our lives where we are. Jesus told us to go into the world and make disciples. He didn't tell us to form a committee first. If we are willing God can fill us with the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost happened once, but the work of the Spirit is still happening today. Amen.

Numbers 11:24-30

<sup>24</sup> So Moses went out and told the people what the Lord had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. <sup>25</sup> Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again.

<sup>26</sup> However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. <sup>27</sup> A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

<sup>28</sup> Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!"

<sup>29</sup> But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" <sup>30</sup> Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Acts 2:1-21

**2** When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues<sup>[a]</sup> as the Spirit enabled them. **5** Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **6** When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. **7** Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? **9** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome **11** (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”**12** Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

**13** Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

**14** Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. **15** These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! **16** No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

**17** “In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and 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 heavens above

and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and billows 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 everyone who calls

on the name of the Lord will be saved.’