

## Sermon on Pentecost Sunday — Acts 2:1–21 and 37–41



When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. <sup>7</sup> Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup> Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome <sup>11</sup> (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs — we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" <sup>12</sup> Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup> Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup> '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. <sup>18</sup> Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. <sup>19</sup> I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. <sup>20</sup> The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. <sup>21</sup> And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

<sup>37</sup> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup> Peter replied, "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. <sup>39</sup> The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call." <sup>40</sup> With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." <sup>41</sup> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

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Peter, John, James, and the others had now remained in Jerusalem for ten days already. The events of recent times had moved them deeply. On the one hand, they were overjoyed that Jesus had truly risen from the dead and now stands at the right hand of God. On the other hand, there was this uneasy lingering feeling of emptiness and they asked themselves: "Where is he now?" and "How are we supposed to carry on at all?" Jesus had said: "Go and proclaim the gospel to all nations." But how was all of this meant to happen? The disciples at that time were surely the least qualified people for this task. Most of them were Galileans. Galileans had a distinctive accent, and some rabbis had actually forbidden a Galilean from reading the Torah aloud in public for that very reason. How, then, were the disciples supposed to proclaim the gospel in Galilee to the whole world? And yet the disciples did what Jesus had commanded. They went to Jerusalem and waited for the Holy Spirit. But what all of this was supposed to mean, they did not know.

Perhaps one or two of you are wondering: why couldn't the Holy Spirit simply come immediately after the Ascension? Jesus could have, so to speak, passed the baton directly to the Holy Spirit and the disciples wouldn't have needed that waiting period at all. My view is this: that waiting period between the Ascension and Pentecost was nonetheless crucially important. It was important because it shows us that we as the Church are dependent on the Holy Spirit. Before Pentecost, Peter was still the fearful disciple who denied even knowing Jesus at the slightest hint from a servant girl in the temple courtyard. After Pentecost, we meet a different Peter and one who speaks publicly about Jesus before thousands of people.

What happened at Pentecost is described in the Acts of the Apostles with powerful images: fire from heaven, a rushing wind, and a complete transformation of the disciples. But the emphasis is not so much on these signs themselves, as on who had appeared. Especially when we speak of the Holy Spirit, the temptation is very great to mix the Holy Spirit with the human spirit, as though the Holy Spirit were already present within the human being all along, needing only to be kindled. If that were the case, one would simply have to press the right buttons or apply the right methods: pray hard enough, believe firmly enough, or praise God with genuine devotion. Even though these

things are good, when they come from the human being they are not faith, and they have nothing to do with God — only with religion.

The disciples at that time faced an enormous task. They were to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world. And the time before Pentecost was not a time of training, not even a time of preparation. It was solely and entirely a time of waiting. We as the Church and every individual Christian, know this time of waiting. We too face unfinished tasks, challenges both in our personal lives and as the Church as a whole. In the face of the many problems and difficulties that confront us, one could throw one's hands up and give up or fall into frantic activism. We do well to look at Pentecost. What made the difference for the disciples before and after Pentecost? It was that God himself was present and at work through the Holy Spirit. We as the Church cannot earn or manufacture the Holy Spirit. We can only ask for him. And that is why all Pentecost hymns are prayers of petition for the Holy Spirit. These hymns show us, among other things, that we need the Holy Spirit. Amid all the challenges facing us in the Church and in our private lives, nothing better could happen to us than this one thing alone: that we come to understand how much we need God.

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And then, suddenly, he was there. God's Spirit came upon the disciples, and the whole world took notice. The disciples were certainly overwhelmed, and one could see and feel physically that something had happened to them. But we should not focus on these outward events. Over the years I have noticed that people show the outward effects of the Holy Spirit in quite different ways. Some of this is culturally conditioned. In Africa, people dance, use drums and loud music, and give genuine outward expression to being deeply moved. Europeans tend to be somewhat more reserved. But what matters is not this outward effect of the Spirit. What matters is what becomes visible as the result of his coming.

I notice that Peter, even while personally filled with the Spirit, makes every effort to bring clarity into the situation: "Listen carefully to what I say!" he declares. This tells us that the outward effect of the Spirit was only one side of the story. Ultimately, something more is at stake. What matters is that the Gospel is proclaimed and proclaimed in such a way that it is understood. The Holy Spirit does dwell within the fog of human emotion but He brings clarity. And part of that clarity is that sin is exposed. Peter continues in his sermon and explains: "You had Jesus nailed to the cross and put to death." Our preaching must not shy away from this either. Where sin is present, where we have turned away from God, that sin must be brought to light. For the Jews of that day, this was at first a shock. Up to that moment they had assumed Jesus was dead and could no longer be a threat. Now it becomes clear to them that they are dealing with this Jesus more than ever. And they realize that this Jesus is not only Lord of the world, but Lord of their very own personal destiny. This recognition pressed them toward the question: "What can we do now?" Peter continues and proclaims crystal-clear Gospel: "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." This apostolic sermon shows us how completely we depend on the Holy Spirit. Peter's preaching remains only an instrument. Had he spoken those same words a few hours earlier, they would have had no effect. But now the Holy Spirit worked through that preaching, and it cut the people to the heart.

However the Gospel did not remain in the heart alone but pressed outward. The very fact that the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the gift of speaking in many different languages shows us that the Holy Spirit wants to reach outward and to reach all people. On that day, three thousand people were baptized across many different languages. Just imagine: three thousand people baptized in a single day at St. Luke's Church. I can picture what a challenge that would be for all of us. The Pentecost miracle shows us that language barriers were overcome. The Holy Spirit was not meant to speak only Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. He was meant to be a universal language. Jerusalem was only one point on the map. But people from all nations went out from there into the wide world and proclaimed the same message they had heard from Peter. Again, what matters is not the miracle of languages as such, what matters is that barriers are overcome so that the Gospel may enter into people's hearts. It means that parents and godparents teach the Gospel to their children in child-friendly language. It means that I pick up the Bible not as a dusty old book but hear in it the living God speaking to me. It means that someone receives from these words comfort, strength, and faith. This is how the Holy Spirit works!

When the disciples spoke in different languages on that day, all of this happened. And the people asked: "What shall we do?" Today we ask the same question: "What shall we do in the face of all the crises within us, within our church, and within our world?" The answer remains the same clear answer of the Holy Spirit: "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." Amen.