

** Please note that the sermon as preached may not match the sermon as printed **

Philippians 4:4-7 Common English Bible

⁴ Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵ Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶ Don’t be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Acts 2:1-21 CEB Pentecost

² When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

⁵ There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. ⁷ They were surprised and amazed, saying, “Look, aren’t all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?” ⁸ How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!” ¹² They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, “What does this mean?” ¹³ Others jeered at them, saying, “They’re full of new wine!”

¹⁴ Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, “Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! ¹⁵ These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect; after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! ¹⁶ Rather, this is what was spoken through 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 will see visions.
Your elders will dream dreams.*

¹⁸ *Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.*

¹⁹ *I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and a cloud of smoke.*

²⁰ *The sun will be changed into darkness,
and the moon will be changed into blood,
before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.*

²¹ *And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.^[a]*

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. **Thanks be to God!**

Today is Pentecost – and here we are – on the birthday of the Church, celebrating the new thing that began with Pentecost, celebrating in a congregation that is itself preparing for a new thing. St. A’s is in transition. No matter what happens next, we can’t go back to who we were before, and it’s not yet clear what the congregation will look like in the future. But the Session is hard at work. We are actively seeking a transitional pastor to help shepherd us from where we were before to what we will become.

It is quite fitting to feel like we, too, are on the verge of something new on this day when we celebrate how the gift of the Holy Spirit descended on those waiting disciples. Now and then, God’s spirit changes everything.

The book of Acts was written by Luke many years after the events of Pentecost. His description is not written how a modern news reporter would have reported the event. Instead it is written to convey how the disciples came to understand it. When the first disciples looked back on that day, they realized that Pentecost was when it all began. Even today we declare that Pentecost is the birthday of the church, because it marked the beginning of a new era in God’s work in the world.

As Christians, Pentecost is one of the big three festivals of the church year, along with Christmas, and Easter. On this day we encouraged you to wear red, and we remember that Pentecost isn’t only a story about the first disciples, it is a reminder that God’s Holy Spirit, symbolized by the ever-changing *wildness of a flame*, is active within each of us.

So, let’s take a closer look at that glorious day that began in an ordinary way.

The disciples had gathered together for the feast of Pentecost, a Jewish holy day that began as a celebration of the first fruits of the harvest, 50 days after the Passover. Later it included the celebration of God’s covenant with God’s people, the law given to Moses.

Theologian, Debra Mumford, helpfully divides what happened that day into five actions of the spirit.¹

The first – is that the calendars and schedules of all the disciples were cleared so that they could be present on Pentecost. That may seem like a small thing, but I wonder, have you ever had the Holy Spirit act through your calendar?

I know I have. One notable time was when I was considering a year-long retreat with the Spiritual Exercises in Everyday life. That retreat includes one Saturday morning a month, a daily time of prayer, and meeting with a spiritual director twice a month. Every summer before that year when I had looked up the retreat dates on my calendar, I already had other activities on those Saturday retreat mornings. Until that year. I still had activities two or three times a month on Saturdays – but every single Saturday listed for the retreat was open. A chill went down my spine. That’s the Holy Spirit at work – behind the scenes, clearing our calendars so we don’t miss out.

Or maybe you have gone to a store for the first time in months only to find a friend getting out of her car in the parking lot? A coincidence? I don’t think so. A friend calls those God-incidences: when the Holy Spirit brings us to the time and place where we need to be – to be a blessing, or to receive a blessing. Or as Mumford writes, “to be available for God.” God’s Spirit changes everything.

When the Holy Spirit arrived with wind and flame, the power of that spirit gave each person the gift of speaking a language not their own – a true gift of God. This sign of the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit has a ring of truth for me.

I don’t know about you, but four years of studying Japanese in high school left me barely able to function in that language. [Where is my pencil? Where is the train station? I’m sorry, please speak more slowly...]

But by the Holy Spirit, the disciples were empowered immediately to share the “mighty works of God” with those around them – and who were those in the streets? Pilgrims from a large number of other countries, countries whose languages God had now bestowed on the disciples. And they each heard the good news of Jesus in their own language. God’s spirit changes everything.

Where else was the Holy Spirit at work on the first Pentecost?

¹ Debra Mumford in her commentary on this text from 2020, Working Preacher website: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/day-of-pentecost/commentary-on-acts-21-21-9>

The Holy Spirit was present in the crowd who stopped and listened, whose attention was drawn to the spectacle of the disciples praising God in a familiar language, and the rush of the wind. Each pilgrim there was there because God had drawn them there. They, too, had their calendars cleared so that they could be there at that moment to witness the arrival of God’s Holy Spirit. They were in just the right place that Pentecost morning to hear the message Peter was empowered by the Spirit to bring to them.

And what about Peter? Peter had been known as the disciple to always put his foot in his mouth. Remember the transfiguration when he misunderstood what he was seeing? Remember his denial of Jesus ... three times? But on Pentecost morning he was filled with the Holy Spirit – and emboldened to preach that first sermon.

I know that I’m not the only person in our church who has ever preached a sermon. And for me it never gets old or routine – each and every week I pray that God will use the offering I have prepared to connect with each person who hears it. Peter was undoubtedly feeling something similar. And God’s Holy Spirit did just that -- inspired the crowd to listen and receive the message Peter brought to them. We read that 3,000 people turned their lives over to Jesus that day and followed him. God’s spirit changes everything.

How has the Holy Spirit changed your life? How is the Holy Spirit still changing everything?

Let’s consider how the Holy Spirit first grew the church, and see how that might apply to us today.

The growth of the church reminds me of the concentric circles that spread through the water when you drop a stone in a pond of still water. The ripples begin small and get wider and wider.

At first the church was really small. It was Jesus, and his disciples. And if we look between the lines, there were also followers of Jesus who were not in the inner circle: the women who provided for their food, their friends and family, and the curious. Compared to the now global Christian church, this was still a very small number.

Jesus’ earthly ministry was focused on his disciples – on that inner circle. After he was raised from the dead he appeared to them in many places, finally leaving them with a reminder of what God had promised, that God would not leave them orphans, but would send God’s own spirit upon them to encourage, teach, and empower them for what was still yet to come on their adventures of faith.²

² See John 14:15ff and Acts 1:1-8.

And then at Pentecost – the Holy Spirit descended and the church exploded. Multiple languages, multiple expressions of following Jesus trace their founding to that day in Jerusalem.

Returning to the image of God’s spirit moving like ripples in a pond, we can see how the good news of Jesus spread from his life, death, and resurrection, and then, like a tsunami of waves moving out from the day of Pentecost, it rippled through family, friendships, communities, language groups ... until one day many centuries later the ripples landed in our lives here in Oregon. And it all began at Pentecost.

Just as the Holy Spirit was given to the church universal at Pentecost, I also believe the Holy Spirit is also given to each of us, and God’s Spirit truly changes everything, beginning closest to home.

Think for a moment about when you first learned about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. For some of us, it was in what is called the domestic church, the place you call home and the family or friends you share that home with. Or perhaps it was through a teacher at church, a pastor, a friend that you learned about Christianity. Those are the places the Holy Spirit uses to help us grow, the incubators for our life of faith and our adult discipleship.

Those places are at the center of how the Holy Spirit began its work in your life, and from that center ripples extended and continue to extend as you share the Good news of Jesus with others. I wonder where your life of faith began? I wonder how it was nurtured? I wonder who you are nurturing now?

And through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are connected with people and churches, both near and far. In our prayers we pray for churches and communities around the world – why? Not just because the news concerns us. But because we believe God’s spirit is already at work there, and we desire, by our prayers, to make a difference in those places of concern.

Earlier in the service we sang about the work of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual,

“Every time I feel the spirit, moving in my heart, I will pray...”

It is a great reminder of an additional activity of God’s Holy Spirit – to inspire us to pray. “Every time I feel the spirit, moving in my heart... I will pray...”

Last week we were encouraged by Paul’s letter to the Philippians to give thanks each time we remember someone. But of course, we can pray other prayers for the person God places on our hearts. Sometimes our prayers are prayers for divine assistance, or reassurance. Sometimes our prayers are for practical concerns – a safe trip, a smooth recovery from illness, good recall for exams in school, or comfort for those who mourn.

Through these movements in our hearts, through these nudges in our thoughts, through the comments and leadership of others - God’s Holy Spirit inspires us ... and changes everything.

One of the ways we are nudged by the spirit to pray or to act is when we read or hear things about the world that trouble us. As Christians we believe that the Holy Spirit informs our conscience, and is ready to help us make good choices for ourselves and for others. But what do we do when we read the horrifying accounts of famine, war, or injustice? Is the spirit moving in your heart? Will you pray? Will your prayer move you to act in some way?

I appreciate the writing of theologian Donald Bloesch. His thin book on intercessory prayer (“The struggle of prayer”) presents the idea that that if we pray for someone to have their needs met by God, we should be prepared to be the answer to that prayer.³ [repeat] God has empowered us through the gift of the Holy Spirit to do great things for others, and being the answer to a prayer is one of those great things. I must confess that I almost stopped praying at that point in his book. Really? Any prayer that I prayed? I could be the answer to that prayer? I could bring God’s comfort to the grieving, help someone to find a good job, assist a frazzled friend as she deals with her teenager. Yes. Really. God may lead me to be the answer to those prayers and more. AND God may lead you. As we read the paper, scroll through social media, or watch the news - pay attention. Listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit moving in your heart. Pray. And be prepared for the Holy Spirit to use your prayers to not only help the person and situation you are praying for – but to challenge and change you.

After all, God’s Holy Spirit changes everything.

Amen.

³ Donald Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer*, Helmers & Howard, 1988.