

The Promise of Pentecost Power Part I

Acts 2:1-13; Romans 8:22-27

If you had to give up one special date in the church calendar, which one would you give up? As you reflect back over Covid time, which church special dates were the most difficult to not commemorate in our usual fashion?

If we had to give up Christmas, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter or Pentecost, which one would seem the least crucial?

Most of us, have a tough time picturing a year with no Christmas, no Maundy Thursday, no Good Friday or no Easter. Because of the traditional, cultural & congregational emphasis of these four, we would probably say, “Well, if I must choose, I can do without Pentecost.”

Let’s study the first Pentecost event today and next week. Many Christians tend to become uncomfortable when we talk about the Holy Spirit. We think of issues like speaking in tongues, prophecies of end times, when people proclaim they had a word from God. Also, we get uncomfortable when we talk about power. Plus, we know the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, and it blows as it wills, so we don’t have control over it.

Samuel Moffett shared this story. “I’ve had Korean Presbyterians, new to the US, say to me a little wistfully, ‘You American Presbyterians pay more attention to your Book of Order than you do to the Bible.’ It is not true, but if we give that impression, we’d better be careful. Presbyterians are reformed, yes, but we always need reforming. Presbyterians, I like to think, are renewed but we always need renewing.

“We need to talk daily with the One who ‘leads us beside the still waters; who restores, who renews our souls’. The life-giving dynamic in the Christian connection is the ‘living water, the gift of God through the Holy Spirit that brings us into union with Jesus Christ. There is nothing unPresbyterian about that.” Moffett concludes, “There is no renewal, unless we know who Jesus Christ is.” We must be open, willing and seeking Holy Spirit renewal.

Even though Pentecost may cause us bewilderment rather than celebration, we need Pentecost Without Jesus coming to earth - Christmas, we would not have Good Friday or Maundy Thursday. Without Jesus’ death, Christianity would be a meaningless martyrdom without the victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ – when we celebrate Easter. And it is Pentecost that enables the gift of faith by which we can know that the birth, life, death & resurrection of Jesus are for us! Christ was not finished when He rose from the dead & ascended to be glorified.

So let’s dive into this story. **First, the disciples were waiting for the fulfillment of a promise – to receive power.** Jesus promised us before he ascended to heaven, to always be with us, even to the end of the age. (Matt 28:20)

When Jesus told the disciples he was going away, he promised them twice at the Lord’s Supper, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world can not accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16-17)

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26) This was given as a word of comfort and assurance before Jesus’ crucifixion. The Holy Spirit is a wonderful gift of Almighty Creator God living in each of us!

Second, we can emulate the attitudes and posture of those waiting for the Holy Spirit. The disciples were together in Jerusalem. They were trying to figure out, discern, what was going on after Jesus died, rose again, and had showed himself to them with convincing proof he was alive. They saw him ascend. We can assume they were comforting each other and were waiting for the Holy Spirit and the power that Jesus had promised because they were told to wait in Jerusalem. Their risen Lord had told them, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; & you will be my

witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

How do we demonstrate we are a people who are open to receive the fullness of the power of God’s Spirit and to continue to receive the fullness of that power? The posture and attitude of these Christians has at least 4 aspects to it.

First, they were together, discussing, singing, reflecting, waiting and worshipping. We know they were doing this after Pentecost, so it is easy to assume they were doing this as they were waiting for Jesus’ promise to be fulfilled. This is a good regular habit. It’s what Bible study and Sunday School and worship is about. This attitude and posture is important.

We find strength, comfort and wisdom in being together. One of the elements of worship we miss during Covid, is singing. Sure we can do this alone, or with a CD or a video. But something happens to us spiritually and communally as we do it together. It’s the same for all parts of spiritual life like discerning together. This helps us to be nourished spiritually.

A second aspect is the necessity of being in a spirit of prayer. We need times alone in prayer. We need times together in prayer. We must open our hearts to our God, allowing our Creator to capture our attention. This attitude requires we take the time to be open, to receive divine power and energy that God wants to give us through His Spirit. When we wait with receptivity, often the Almighty empowers us with new ideas and new methods.

These early believers were doing that. They were together, worshipping, anticipating, waiting, discussing, supporting each other, and listening for Jesus’ promise to them. They didn’t know what would happen, or how it would occur, or even when. But they trusted Jesus enough to slow down their lives, to be together, taking time off from their responsibilities, waiting expectantly.

Another aspect of being together is to take seriously what the Scriptures say. We can

imagine that between the ascension of Jesus and Pentecost this group of 120 close followers of Jesus, were sharing their understanding of Old Testament Scripture and their memories of what they heard Jesus teach. I think that’s one reason Peter was able to expound so well on OT teachings and clearly present Jesus to the crowd. The disciples were open & receptive to each other, scripture, learning & God’s timing.

And a fourth aspect of being together is they were waiting, trusting, expectantly for God to act. We live in a culture of instant gratification. If something goes wrong in our life we tend to blame someone and get irritated. We forget that God can use those interruptions to actually get our attention. But our frustration gets in the way of our being able to hear and see. It is difficult to keep waiting expectantly. I believe we have been worried about the future of the church for some time. And I know we have been praying and now possibly thinking of future ideas. Plus, I suspect many of us have been unsatisfied as well as worn out.

But I’d like us to set aside our ideas for a short while and simply tell our Savior – we are waiting, listening – to whatever drops into our laps. This is what we are being asked to do at this time of discernment in our church life. Please go way beyond your expectations of a pastor. Your pastor is not your savior. That’s the easy way to focus on the future. Instead, we have a letter from the Deacons outlining our process, with four questions to help our focus.

And there is a Pastor’s Report in which shares my hopes and beliefs about discernment. It offers a list of scriptures to help us reflect, pray, meditate and not hurry in this process. As much as I like our democratic church process, it can become the enemy of the good – hearing God. Let’s discern and listen instead of quickly look at ideas, discuss and vote. Let’s try to get a sense of what God wants for us before we jump to solutions.

Pentecost promises us that God wants to empower us. And it suggests not just being together in spirit, but physically together as a

people in worship, a posture, an attitude that tells the Almighty we are receptive to the Holy Spirit. This being together, probably requires a few more meetings. As Act 2, verse 42 says, “They devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer.” And our scripture tells us what occurred, before and after Peter’s Pentecost sermon.

A third aspect of Pentecost is, it’s a picture of believers receiving power. It occurred at the Feast of Tabernacles or another name for it is Feast of Weeks. Every male Jew who lived within 20 miles of Jerusalem was legally bound to attend. Pentecost means “the fiftieth,” after a week of weeks – 7 weeks each having 7 days after Passover. So we see God used special Jewish days for his new communication. Some think that there may have been as many people in Jerusalem as Passover. When we read the list of people who were in attendance, it’s impressive how many were there from all over.

The Feast had two main significances. It had a historical significance in that it commemorated the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Second, it had an agricultural significance in that at Passover the first barley of the crop was offered to God, and at Pentecost two loaves were offered in gratitude for the completed and in-gathered harvest. This is where we get the idea of “first fruits” offerings. Also this day was a festive holiday with streets full of people.

So at Pentecost God gave his people the Holy Spirit – taking believers farther than just the law. And at Pentecost God gave his people another gift to sustain them – more than just physical food. Now they receive the Holy Spirit to help with spiritual food. The timing and symbolism I think is important.

This power was demonstrated in three visible ways, and one less visible way - by the sound of a violent wind, tongues of fire on each of the believers, and all began speaking in tongues.

The Hebrew word for *spirit and wind is ruach.* The wind had been an emblem of the Spirit for the Hebrew people throughout the generations.

This wind of God was present at the creation. It was this wind of which Ezekiel spoke of in the valley of dry bones in which a dejected, defeated people would be brought back to life (Ezekiel 37). Jesus used the image of the wind for the Holy Spirit when He was describing to Nicodemus what it is to be born-again by the Spirit in John, chapter 3.

Tongues of fire were also visible. Fire is a regular sign of God’s presence in the Bible. We have the burning bush with Moses. The pillar of fire leading Israel out of Egypt toward the Promised Land. Sacrifices including the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. (I Kings 18). Fire is a sign of God’s power. (Judges 13:20) Fire is an instrument of God’s judgment (Num. 11:1; 1 Kings 1:10). The Bible describes the Lord God as “a consuming fire” which is why it’s often used as a symbol of the presence of God. (Heb. 12:29

And we have refining fire. (I Peter 1:17) The fire of the Holy Spirit purges, burns away the chaff - all that debilitates and prevents us from becoming what God created you and me to become. The Holy Spirit refines us, as does the melting process that burns off the dross bringing out the pure metal. It purges us and enables us to live with the warmth of God’s Spirit emanating from our lives. This fire of the Holy Spirit helps us to love others, be a people who are more giving, more consistent in our Christian lives, and more forgiving of others. It empowers us in all kinds of ways. These early believers in Jesus, had visible proof that God was present and gifting them.

The third visual is, speaking in tongues. This may be the one proof that causes us the most uncomfortableness. There is lots of debate about it that we don’t have time to go into. But we do know the result – the believers, who were presumably in or near the Temple, attracted a crowd, “because each one heard them speaking in their own language.”

And then ***the invisible sign of Holy Spirit power is exactly what we have been looking at in our study of Colossians.*** It’s what the

Apostle Paul means when he says he wants more for us. It's what he means when he prays that we have the right knowledge and wisdom. And it's what we ourselves know. Plus, this all becomes visible as we live mature godly lives.

And the less visible proof of the Holy Spirit was and is – *the believers know something has occurred within them*. They knew for real they were filled by Almighty Creator Yahweh. This is hard to illustrate but it's something we know. It shows up in how people live.

A short story may help us understand this less visible proof. A church with lots of staff had a day long meeting and ordered pizza for lunch. When the delivery man came into the church, he stopped suddenly inside the door and said, "Some thing feels different here!"

The danger of organized Christianity is that it can become powerless! There is nothing more boring than empty theological words and going through the motions. There is nothing more enervating, life-sapping, than dry institutional religion that simply becomes a head trip and a business, & going through the motions. Jesus did not come to found a new religion. Instead, Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

We have looked at three aspects of Pentecost and will look at another two next week when we have communion. But let's close with two different ways to understand Holy Spirit power.

Imagine a person outdoing themselves. Take the football player who in the last two minutes of the game, with the score against his team, running faster than his legs have ever carried him before; farther than he ever dreamed of running; weaving through the opposing players, and scores the winning touchdown. When he comes out of the game, the coach says to him, "I didn't know you had it in you."

If he is honest, his reply would be, "I didn't. I was picked up and carried by something out side of myself."

That's the picture of what happens to you and me when we are open to the fullness, the power of the Holy Spirit, allowing His wind to propel us, Her fire to purify us and the gift of communication capabilities to help us convey the hope and objectivity of the Almighty's truth, like Peter did. And I suspect more often than we realize, someone or a group, carried out some thing that was beyond their capability and way beyond the possibilities, problems and barriers of a situation.

Also, it's worth reminding ourselves of the life of Elisabeth Elliot as an example of Holy Spirit power. She found it possible to go on, despite incredible hardship and obstacles. She faced a lot of tragedy in her life. She describes her first year on the mission field in Ecuador. She faced three major blows to her faith. The informant who was helping her with the native language was murdered. All of her language materials, everything that went into the writing of a language that had never been written down before, were stolen. And the station on which her fiance, Jim Elliot, had been working went down the river in a flood. Sounds like Satan was hard at work, trying to discourage her.

Now decades later, as one who has had many more tragedies, including the murder by Auca tribesmen of her husband Jim, the death of her second husband and many other trials, she has a track record of waiting upon God and receiving power, endurance, hope, faith, trust, - you name it. She has written and shared verbally, "When I was 12 years old, I told the Lord that I wanted Him to work out His will in my life at any cost. When He set about doing that, I was amazed. I didn't think it was going to be that way. We never do. The will of God is never exactly what we expect it to be. It may seem to be much worse; but in the end, it's going to be a lot better and a lot bigger. What is your desire?"

This is our challenge at this time in our congregational life. So please participate in this discernment process. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to be on us, in us and guide us as we deliberate and wait expectantly.