

Words And Deeds: Fire Fall Down
By Jason Huff
April 29, 2018
Zechariah 2:1-5; Hebrews 12:28-29; Acts 2:1-21

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 2:1-21. May God add His richest blessing on His holy and perfect Word. “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” 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. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ““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. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

Gift giving is a lot different than it used to be. Today gift giving is hard because we don't have many things we need, but a whole lot of detail to what we want. We don't want just a bike; we want the red Huffy 2255x with adjustable mirrors and luggage rack. We don't want a video game; we want SuperMarioKart 7, and not for the DS but for the Switch. Who can keep track? So what do we do? We buy gift cards, which is a step up from just handing somebody a twenty. They tell us we thought about the person enough to know they'd like the shop we chose for them. I'm thankful for all of you who've given me gift cards to the movies over the years. And yet isn't it great when someone knows what we really want and need and gives it to us?

I think that's part of the reason that packing Operation Christmas Child boxes is so exciting. You know that kids who don't have much are going to love the toys and school supplies and other items we give them. And as we get older, gifts mean different things too. When you have the money to buy most of the things you want, the gifts that mean the most are usually the ones that hit us personally. When I know one of my boys got me something they chose for me that is really perfect, something I didn't even know I needed but love, that's truly awesome. They get me.

Today's passage is about a gift – one of the greatest gifts imaginable – the gift of the Holy Spirit – being given to the disciples. We'll learn a great deal about the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts because that's where we see Him in action – a lot. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God living within us and working through us. It is so interrelated with the Father and with Jesus the Son that it's used interchangeably sometimes with the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Jesus. And today, we're going to see how the first disciples experienced His permanent presence with them for the first time.

When we look at the Old Testament, we see the Spirit all over the place, but working in significantly different ways. God's presence is with the Israelites as a pillar of wind and fire leading them through the wilderness. He comes upon people and they prophesy. He empowered people like David to write the psalms, to lead Israel, to warn her of judgment and to steer her towards righteousness.

But the presence of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, wasn't consistent. The Spirit was upon people some places, some of the time. Faithful believers did not have automatic access to the Spirit. It was given to them as they had need, as the Father willed, but not permanently. Sometimes we see Old Testament saints lifted up as examples who did some pretty awful things. And yet we have to give them credit in that they were living in a different era, trying to be righteous in a time before Jesus, before they knew the full measure of God's grace and forgiveness, before they knew the power of the Spirit living with them all the time. It is a testimony to them that they were faithful without the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence that we as believers have been promised. And it meant that when Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit despite the risks, it was a big deal.

With that in mind, we head into the passage. It's the Day of Pentecost, which was a pretty major deal. Pentecost means “fifty,” so it's fifty days after Passover. It was the second of the three Jewish festivals where people were expected to travel to the temple. More people came to Jerusalem to celebrate it than even Passover because the weather was better (being in May or June) and the workload was lighter. All sorts of people are there, celebrating the wheat harvest and the giving of the Law to Moses. That's important because the Holy Spirit is the proof that God's harvest of the Kingdom has begun and that through Jesus, something greater than the law has been given to us.

So the disciples are all together, likely in the place where they had been meeting, the home where they ate the Last Supper. And the Holy Spirit arrives. It is monumental. Luke can only speak about it in metaphors – it was like a violent wind; it was like tongues of fire. This is a spiritual occurrence that only happens once, so Luke can only describe it by analogy, by the closest thing we can understand.

Both of these metaphors have deep significance. God guided the Israel as a pillar of wind and fire through the desert outside the Holy Land. The very word “Spirit” in Greek is *pneuma*, which also has the meaning “breath” or “wind.” When that wind comes in and fills the house, you know God is moving.

Fire probably has even the greater significance. Not only did the Spirit lead the people in the pillar of fire, God had described Himself in the Scripture as a consuming fire. There's also a parallel to God's first manifestation of Himself to Moses. What is it that Moses saw out there as he was taking care of his flocks? A burning bush, a big plant that is on fire but doesn't actually burn up. God appeared to Moses then. These tongues of fire sit on each of the disciples.

And here's the beauty of it – when God's people came in contact with the holy before this point, if they touched the Ark of the Covenant or offered anything in the sanctuary that wasn't commanded, they died. Even at His closest, when God's presence came to be in the sanctuary, He was separated from everything by a great veil in the Most Holy Place, and only the high priest could enter there once a year. But now, the Spirit of God comes to rest on the believers. And like the burning bush, they aren't consumed by the fire. They are still themselves, but now so much more because God is in a very literal sense with them.

Now not only do they now have the Holy Spirit, they are filled with the Holy Spirit. There's still a difference. The Spirit comes at certain times and places with extraordinary power. Believers all have the Holy Spirit at all times, but we aren't always filled with Him. (Luke's language changes here to show that.) So we shouldn't expect as some churches do that everyone who believes in God and has the Holy Spirit will speak in languages they don't know. But when the Spirit does fill believers completely, amazing things like this happen.

So they go out praising God, probably the whole lot of them, around 130 people. And because the city is full from the festival of Pentecost, they quickly have a very large crowd coming to see what the racket is. People are amazed – they're hearing the wonders of God in their native languages. The list of places people are from is huge, and it's essentially all the nations in that day where there was a Jewish presence. The word about Jesus is spreading to the entire Jewish community – not in full, but the gospel is being preached to every language within the Jewish culture of that time.

And the crowd is flabbergasted. This is a miracle, but what does it mean? It's a good question. Ever since the tower of Babel, people have been separated by language. Now for a brief shining moment, there is understanding across all these different peoples – hearing the praise of what God has done through Jesus Christ. How is it happening, and why?

The skeptic response is pretty funny – “they've had too much wine.” Now I don't know about you, but I've never met a drunk person who suddenly could speak another language! I have the feeling that those who refused to believe heard all the clamor of all these different languages and did what we do when we hear a foreign language – we tune it out. We think it's nonsense.

But to those who can understand it, it's like music to their ears. If you've ever traveled to a country where English isn't the main language and stayed there for a while, you know how wonderful it is to hear someone speaking your own language and understanding. That's what this is like for those hearing the disciples. Many are far from home; many may be living in a foreign country to them. When they hear their own tongues, it's as if God is speaking to them personally.

Finally, Peter explains what's going on. Obviously, since it's only 9am, nobody's drunk – as if that could make it possible! Instead, he quotes the prophet Joel. Just as Joel predicted, the Spirit is being poured out, and it's for everyone – men, women, young and old, anyone who believes. Signs and wonders like this will happen because we are in the final age of humanity, the era of forgiveness before the judgment. And all who call upon the Lord through Jesus will be saved from their sin.

In many ways, this is a descriptive passage. We're supposed to be in awe of the wonder of what God has done, but it doesn't have a lot of application, things that the passage is telling us to do. We've really just begun, because Peter's sermon really gets rolling in next week's lesson. But there are some core ideas that I think can inspire us and challenge us in our daily walk with God.

First thought: *The Spirit is still given to us as a gift...so let's appreciate Him.* As we'll soon learn, the apostles and disciples went from terrified of their shadows to bold witnesses for Jesus. They braved incredible persecution and did it rejoicing. All because the Holy Spirit showed up to lead and guide and empower them. The change in them was so remarkable that even the religious authorities who stood against them were impressed (as we'll learn in Acts 4:14).

The Holy Spirit is the One who guides us into love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). When God promised to remove from believers a heart of stone and to give us a heart of flesh in Ezekiel 36:26, He made it happen through Jesus' death for us and the Spirit's work in us. The Spirit is how we interact with Jesus even now and know His heart for us. No other gift we've ever received can compare.

The truth is, the reason we can know and believe in Jesus 2,000 after His earthly life is due to the Holy Spirit's work. It's the Holy Spirit that has kept spreading the story of Jesus through so many attempts to keep it down. It's the Holy Spirit that has kept the truth of the gospel alive through all the errors we've tried to insert into it over the centuries. And it is the Holy Spirit that gives us the power to believe at all.

We started this morning talking about gifts. I know I'm not nearly as appreciative of most gifts as I should be. I've never been great at writing thank-you notes. I work to be better at appreciating the things each of you have done for me and for the church over the years, but I still have a long ways to go. I often look at gifts as utilitarian – I like them for what I get out of them and not the sentiment of the giver. These are my failings, and I think they're pretty common.

But with the Holy Spirit, there's no better gift we could have been given, and there's no better giver with no better intentions. Every day I call myself a Christian, I have God to thank for that, for working out His salvation in me, for giving me the Holy Spirit so I have a true moral compass speaking to me inside my head (even if I don't always follow it). Everyday is an opportunity to thank God that He lives in me, that He isn't far away, that someday I will be in the wonderful presence of God in His completeness – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – but that now I have His presence through the Spirit always beside me, teaching me, guiding me, convicting me of sin and reminding me of forgiveness. The best thing we can do is say thank you.

Here's another thought: *Skeptics prefer simple, incorrect answers over the difficult truth. Will we be skeptics or believers?* It's hard to believe that some people thought that the disciples could speak in tongues because they were drunk. It's one of the dumbest things I can think of. But it provided an easy way to get around the truth – that something miraculous had happened and God was speaking through it. They didn't listen because they didn't want to hear the hard facts that Peter will tell them – that Jesus, whom they killed, is the Savior and Son of God.

I can't tell you whether God created the universe and the earth and all that's in it in an instant or seven 24-hour days or a very long time that He decided to teach to us using the poetic structure of days in Genesis 1 and 2. But I can tell you that any serious scientist who knows anything about the theory of evolution who has no dog in the fight will tell you that the evidence simply doesn't fit Darwin's theory or any other theory of macro-evolution of species. But it's an easy way to avoid the idea that God created the earth. It's illogical to believe that something came from nothing and through random chance assembled itself the way it did, just like being drunk makes you able to speak ancient Persian, but it's easier than believing that God actually did all the creating Himself.

We can think of plenty more examples where the simple answer is wrong but easier to swallow. Yet the reality is that faith is difficult. We often have to believe what we do not see. We have to take the word of others that miraculous events like the one we're studying today are true. The question is not about others, whether they will believe or not. We know that you can find an excuse to believe or disbelieve anything. The question is, will *we* believe as much as our faith allows?

There are plenty of things I'd prefer not to believe. I'd prefer that God not command me to be obedient to Him. I'd prefer that everybody was saved, because then I don't have to worry about myself or anybody else spiritually. The reason that the song *Imagine* by John Lennon resonated with so many people is because we'd like to believe that we could all get along in peace and harmony without God or religion or anything else. John Lennon was onto something in looking for peace; he was just looking in the wrong place, looking away from the only being in the universe who can actually bring it about.

So the question for us today is this: when God is moving in the world, when we are called, commanded, to tell others about Jesus, when we know that the Spirit is moving us to give or to serve or in some way die to ourselves for the good of another, will we do it? Or will we chalk it up to spiritual drunkenness on our part? Will we ignore the miracles around us and say it's all nonsense, or will we join in with what God is doing?

Because, friends, our time is short. We don't know how long we'll have. We could be here another thirty years or die later today. Now is the time of salvation; now is the time to get on board with what the Spirit is doing. As Peter preached, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Will you do that? Will you accept the gift of salvation and the gift of the Spirit? Will you throw away your doubts and trust in faith? Will you let the Spirit move in you, to prompt you to action in Jesus' name? May it be so. May we be able to say with full hearts and full confidence, "God, may your fire fall down on us."