

## *Life in the Spirit*

### Pentecost Sunday – May 30, 2004

#### Sermon Background Study

*Scripture Passage (NRSV)*

*Acts 2:1-17*

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup>In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

*Today is Pentecost. Tomorrow is Memorial Day.  
This is an occasion to celebrate God’s gift to us of his  
Spirit, who leads us and those we have loved to lives of  
passion and purpose.*

*The Holy Spirit returns*

When Acts 2 opens, Jesus’ disciples have gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. The city is packed, with the population having swelled to perhaps 150,000 people. Jews are there from all over the Roman Empire. In the weeks before the festival, the disciples had been with the resurrected Jesus, who before returning to the Father had told the disciples that they were to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had explained that God’s Spirit would come upon them with power so that they could be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth” (see Acts 1).

One can only imagine the anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety that the disciples felt. Only weeks before, they had been cowering in an upstairs room waiting to be rounded up by the Roman

#### The Festival of Pentecost

There are three major festivals in the Old Testament: Passover in early spring, Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks) in late spring, and Tabernacles (or Booths) in early fall. If feasible, all Jewish men were expected to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem for all three festivals each year.

Jesus was crucified at the end of Passover, the festival commemorating the Jews’ release from bondage in Egypt. Pentecost was originally an agricultural festival to show gratitude for the first fruits of the wheat harvest. Over time, Pentecost lost its agricultural connection but was still about “first fruits” in Jesus’ day. Later, Pentecost (“fiftieth” in Greek) transformed into an observance of gratitude for the Law that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai fifty days after Passover.

The Book of Acts tells how, not long after Jesus’ ascension to the Father, Jesus’ disciples were gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. There, as Jesus’ promised, God’s Spirit came upon the disciples, empowering them to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

soldiers after Jesus' crucifixion. But Jesus had passed through death; his resurrection had changed everything. They didn't know what to expect, but they wouldn't have to wait long to find out what was ins store for them. As Luke tells it, they were gathered together when "from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . Divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages" (from today's passage). As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit had returned with power. *Returned??*

Ever since the flight from Egypt more than a millennium before Christ, God had been present with his people in a way that he was not present elsewhere. Indeed, God's dwelling place had been the temple in Jerusalem. But God's people had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God. Consequently, God's presence had departed the temple, "Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . ." (Ezekiel 10:18). Though he would no longer dwell with them as he had, God had not forever abandoned his people. God promised that one day he would put within them a new spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (see Jeremiah 31). Now, as the disciples sat together, that day had come, the Holy Spirit had returned.<sup>1</sup>

### *Passion and purpose*

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, they were able to speak in languages that they couldn't possibly have known. It would be like me leaping up and speaking in Russian. The disciples weren't speaking nonsense. They were speaking languages that could be understood by festival pilgrims from all over the empire. Needless to say, the crowds were "amazed and perplexed."

What was going on? What could such a thing possibly mean?

Some in the crowd tried to dismiss the whole spectacle by accusing the disciples of drunkenness. But the disciples were not drunk and Peter rose to explain to the crowds what was happening.

The disciples are not drunk, Peter says. This is God's work! Prophecies are being fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection it is all happening. This is not alcohol talking, but the Holy Spirit, who is the sign of Christ's power and glory and who is empowering the disciples to do the work of the kingdom. Rather than trying to dismiss the disciples' miraculous abilities, Peter tells them, the crowds ought to repent so that their sins will be forgiven and they too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

William Willimon sees the book of Acts as a book of remembrance in the service of the church's ongoing reformation and renewal. Memorial Day is a day of remembrance when we reflect on all those whom we have loved in life and in death. It is easy to look in all the wrong places for the passion and purpose in life that we all seek and that we've seen in those we remember today. The story of Pentecost helps us to remember that it is God who gives us the power to live. It is his Spirit who infuses us with passion and energy, who provides direction and purpose. Why? So that, like Peter, we might tell others of Christ and so that they might see Christ in us. Like the disciples gathered in that room long ago, we are to do all we can to build God's kingdom and, in this, we are not alone. God is with us. His Spirit guides us and empowers us, if only we will remember and listen.

#### The Holy Who?

Never . . . not once . . . in the Bible is the Holy Spirit referred to using the impersonal pronoun "it." Rather, the Holy Spirit is always a "who," referred to using personal pronouns. At various times, the Holy Spirit *searches, knows, teaches, dwells, accomplishes, gives life, cries out, bears witness, has desires, is grieved, helps, intercedes, works all things together, strengthens, and is lied to!* These words and phrases describe what persons do, not inanimate objects or impersonal forces.

Admittedly, it can be difficult to think of the Holy Spirit as a person. We generally use the word "spirit" in impersonal ways. Our images of the Holy Spirit – a dove, wind, fire – are all impersonal. So, we have to retrain ourselves to refer to and think of the Holy Spirit as the very personal presence of God with us. Perhaps it will help if we remember this: Paul uses the title "Holy Spirit" as often as he uses "Lord Jesus Christ"!

<sup>1</sup> Last year's Background Study on Pentecost Sunday focused on the Holy Spirit as God's presence with his people, how God's presence had left the temple in Jerusalem but returned to make Christians, collectively and individually, God's temples. You can find this study (June 8, 2003) at [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org).

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more on the Holy Spirit and Pentecost)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 John 14:15-31 Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will be sent after Jesus leaves.</p>	<p>Day 2 Acts 1 Jesus again promises the Spirit before he returns to the Father.</p>
<p>Day 3 Acts 2:14-42 Peter's full speech and its consequences.</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 &amp; 6:19-20 Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that collectively and individually they are God's temples.</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 The temple of the living God.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### June Book Recommendation

*Mere Christianity*, by C.S. Lewis

*Mere Christianity* is a modern-day classic. It has been one of the best-selling Christian books since its original publication. An Oxford professor of medieval literature until his death in 1963, C.S. Lewis' is widely recognized as one of the most influential theologians of our day. His writing is direct and approachable; this book is especially so. *Mere Christianity* is a collection of radio addresses he gave to war-time Britain more than 60 years ago. If you've never read Lewis, this book is the place to start.

Available now at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore  
Bible Academy audio courses are now in-stock at *Inspiration*.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

*The Purpose-Driven Life* has stayed on the bestseller lists for months. Why? Is it because that we can get so wrapped in our daily 'busyness' that only on occasion do we catch our breath and ask ourselves: Where is all this headed? Why am I even here? What does it all mean?

On Pentecost, the disciples found (or better, were found by) all the passion and purpose that they could ever imagine. How could Peter, an inconsequential fisherman from Galilee, give a speech that captivated thousands? God's Spirit grabbed, filled, and powered him for astonishing work and witness for Christ. The book of Acts ought to be titled *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, for it is the Holy Spirit who pushes and drives everyone forward, always pointing the way and strengthening the believers for their work.

It can be very hard for us to grasp and to know that God's Spirit works in each of us. Sometimes we can allow ourselves to "tune out" God's Spirit so completely it is as if we are tone-deaf! You see, this is not magic. The Holy Spirit works with each of us, but not as if we are mere puppets. This is about cooperation and will and discipline.

What can we do to help each other and ourselves to trust in God's Spirit and to embrace the power, passion, and purpose that is God's gift to us? Here's a hint. The immediate follow-up to Pentecost was this: "They (the believers) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Jesus disciples did not sit around passively waiting for the next ecstatic experience. They went to work . . . but to work with a new purpose.