

## **“PENTECOST: SO WHAT’S NEW?”**

**Acts 2:1-21**

**A Sermon by John Thomason**

**Woodbury UMC**

**May 31, 2020**

When the global pandemic broke out over two months ago, health officials identified the malady we are dealing with as the “novel Coronavirus.” The virus was labeled “novel” because it is new, an infection the world has never seen before. But while the Coronavirus itself is novel, the sudden appearance of unknown viruses is not novel. This past week, I read an article stating that since the year 1940, no fewer than 335 new infectious diseases have emerged in human populations around the world. To exacerbate the problem, societies have become more urbanized and international travel has become more common. It’s just the nature of things that novel viruses pop up; and when they do, they now spread like wildfire.

Doesn’t this make you wish for an outbreak of something “novel” that is creative rather than destructive, that brings healing and hope instead of sickness and despair? Don’t we all long for a new surge of spiritual power in a world and in a Church that have experienced a power outage from the pandemic?

Well, this is exactly what happens on the Jewish festival day of Pentecost two thousand years ago. In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism, Pentecost is a long-standing tradition, an annual observance which celebrates the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. It occurs fifty days after Passover, which, on this particular Pentecost, also happens to be fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection. So while Pentecost itself is not novel, what happens on the Pentecost described in the Book of Acts is novel. Something occurs that is more significant than the giving of the Law; God is now manifested in a more immediate and personal way. There is a new outbreak, or more precisely, a new outpouring of God’s Spirit in human history.

This event is so strange that it’s hard for anyone present to describe in literal terms what happens; but it is likened to unusual phenomena in the natural world – not a virus, thank God, but still something dramatic and powerful. As the faithful followers of Jesus are gathered in one place on the Day of Pentecost, they experience a shattering noise – the rushing of wind – accompanied by a spectacular vision – flames of fire. As Luke tells the story, this event signals something novel, unprecedented, and unheard of coming into the world. Jesus’ followers receive the new gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now, this may seem like a puzzling claim, because in reality God’s Spirit is not new at all. The Old Testament speaks of the “Spirit” of God from the first chapter of Genesis onward. It’s what makes their faith unique and gives it special potency. Conceiving of God as Spirit enables the people of Israel to distinguish the one true God from false gods – from idols that are made by human hands and can be manipulated for human benefit. God is understood to be bigger, more mysterious and elusive than these counterfeit deities. The one true God is invisible, yet more real and powerful than an object like a golden calf, and certainly more worthy of worship.

When the Bible insists that God is Spirit, it is also saying that God is not just an abstract idea, a God who remains remote and stationary in the heavens. God’s Spirit is associated with

God's energy, with God's active presence in the world, which is often likened to the power of wind. It is the wind or Spirit of God who is at work in creation, turning the primeval chaos into order and breathing life into the first human beings. It is the Spirit of God who speaks through Moses and the prophets, creating a covenant nation and calling that nation to faithfulness. It is the Spirit of God who descends upon Jesus at his baptism, who affirms him at his transfiguration, who empowers him to preach the gospel of God's kingdom and do mighty works in God's name, who gives him courage to face rejection and crucifixion.

And so, it's just not the case that on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit is suddenly created as the third person of the Trinity. It's not like the Spirit has been a total stranger to the people of God, and then on Pentecost the Spirit becomes their bosom buddy. No, God's Spirit has been there all along, creating and guiding God's children. But if this is the case, it's fair to ask: so what's new on that first Christian Pentecost?

Well, one thing that's new is the situation in which Jesus' followers find themselves. For three years, the disciples keep company with a prophet from Nazareth whom they gradually recognize to be the Savior of the world, God's Word made flesh. But Jesus dies tragically and prematurely, and the disciples lose their first-hand relationship with him. Thankfully, that loss proves to be temporary. Three days later, on Easter Sunday, Jesus is raised from the dead, and the disciples regain their relationship with him. But after only forty more days in his presence, Jesus leaves them for a second time, ascending to heaven. And now, ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples are missing him yet again, fearful about finding their way without him, feeling lost and powerless, waiting for direction and motivation to continue Jesus' mission on earth.

Having my four-year old grandson in my home during the pandemic has afforded me a crash refresher course in parenting. I've been reminded that when parents leave young children for any significant period of time, they try to address their children's separation anxiety. They prepare children for their absence. They assure them that necessary provisions have been made for their care, and above all, that they are not being permanently abandoned, that their primary caregivers can be counted on to come back to them.

In the same way, before Jesus dies he tries to prepare the disciples for his coming absence. He does this by making a mysterious promise: he says that after he leaves them he will come to them again and remain with them, but in a new and different way. He will send a substitute, if you will, for his physical presence. He will send the Holy Spirit to be their Advocate, Helper, Counselor, and Comforter.

So this is also what's new about the first Christian Pentecost. Yes, the Holy Spirit who descends upon the disciples is the same Spirit who has been present and active since the dawn of creation. But this Spirit is now being manifested in a new way – as a stand-in for the earthly Jesus, as the source of companionship and guidance and strength that the disciples were accustomed to but are now missing.

On the Christian calendar, Pentecost is the 50<sup>th</sup> and last day of the Easter season. By now, I hope you can see how Pentecost completes Easter. Without Pentecost, Easter is bittersweet, because the Church must say farewell to a Christ who rises to return to glory. Without Pentecost, Easter reminds the Church that Jesus has now gone to be with God and his

followers are left alone in the world. Without Pentecost, Easter offers us a risen Christ whose departure leaves the Church to face the world armed with nothing but fond memories of how it was when Jesus was here. But with Pentecost, Easter's Christ promises to return and has returned in the Holy Spirit as comforter, guide, teacher, reminder, and power. With Pentecost, the risen Christ says hello and not goodbye to the Church.

And what a resounding hello it is, with dazzling after-effects! The risen Christ gives the gift of God's Holy Spirit, transforming a gang of virtual strangers into a community of faith, healing their old divisions, releasing new power within them, giving them the ability to communicate with people who speak other languages, filling them with fresh courage and unbridled joy – so much so that bystanders watching them emerge from church that Sunday say, "They're drunk!" Unless I'm sorely mistaken, this is a story that doesn't seem to fit us. When is the last time we emerged from church so joyful, out of control, cut loose, or overheated that someone said of us, "Look at those Christians; they're drunk!"? No, when we get done on Sundays, onlookers are more likely to say, "Look at those Christians; they're dead."

Tom Long, who taught preaching for many years at our Methodist seminary in Atlanta, tells about an earlier time in his ministry when he was teaching children in a Confirmation class. "It was a very small group," Long says. "In fact, there were only three young girls in the class. In one session, I was instructing them about the festivals and seasons of the Christian year, and when we came to the discussion of Pentecost, I asked them if they knew what Pentecost was. Since none of the three knew, I proceeded to inform them that Pentecost was 'when the church was sitting in a group and the Holy Spirit landed on them like tongues of fire on their heads. Then they spoke in all the languages of the world.' Two of the girls took this information in stride, but the third looked astonished, her eyes wide. I looked back at her, and finally she said, 'Gosh, Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday.'"

This is the issue you and I face every Pentecost Sunday. God in Christ is giving something new to the Church, but we're not always present to receive it. We're prone to downplay Pentecost, to avoid or explain away the disruptive descent of the Spirit. Throughout the Book of Acts, the Spirit is that which controls mission, which prods and drags the Church, kicking and screaming, into new areas of ministry. Even in our own time, the Spirit breaks in unexpectedly and moves people to do extraordinary things. The Spirit reminds us that all present arrangements are conditional and temporary. Any time the Church settles down in the status quo, the Spirit intrudes, liberates, sets us free with a liberty that is close to divine intoxication.

On this particular Pentecost Sunday, when we cannot gather in one place as the earliest disciples do, you and I yearn for something new beside the "new normal." We feel powerless in so many ways – powerless to be together, powerless to teach and care for another in our accustomed fashion; and worst of all, powerless to say a proper goodbye to our loved ones when they die. We want to get the power back that we once had, or get plugged into a new source of power.

However, we need to be careful about what we wish for. The good news is that the power we so desire is delivered on Pentecost through the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit. But there is a caveat: Jesus reminds us that the wind blows where it will (John 3:8). God's Spirit will not be housebroken by us, and we might be blown in new directions as we seek to be the church. We may be pushed to develop different forms of ministry that we've never imagined or

planned. We may be given power that we've never had before, and who knows where that might lead?

The fact is, we as a congregation have already been given new kinds of power – the power to be creative and caring in unprecedented ways; the power to worship and do the work of the church though the Internet or Uber or Zoom; the power to connect with each other without touching each other. Only the Spirit knows what our life together will be like tomorrow or when we are finally able to be together again. But like the little girl in Tom Long's Confirmation class, I don't want to be absent when that day comes. I don't want to miss Pentecost.