

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the rushing of a violent wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw divided tongues that were like fire resting on each one of them. ⁴They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, since the Spirit was giving them the ability to speak fluently.

⁵Now there were godly Jewish men from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶When this sound was heard, a crowd came together and was confused, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷They were completely baffled and said to each other, “Look, are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them speaking in his own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, and of Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya around Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes; ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring in our own languages the wonderful works of God.” ¹²They were all amazed and perplexed. They kept saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others mocked them and said, “They are full of new wine.”

¹⁴Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and spoke loudly and clearly to them: “Men of Judea, and all you residents of Jerusalem, understand this, and listen closely to my words. ¹⁵These men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶On the contrary, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷This is what God says will happen in the last days:

I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.

Your sons and your daughters will prophesy.

Your young men will see visions.

Your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy.

¹⁹I will show wonders in the sky above,

and signs on the earth below,

blood and fire and a rising cloud of smoke.

²⁰The sun will be turned to darkness

and the moon to blood

before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹And this will happen: Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Do you know why this day is so important? The two main festivals of the Christian church year, as you know, are Christmas and Easter. But did you know they have a third sister? We treat her like the ugly sister, certainly less deserving of our attention than her two other sisters. But the truth is, whether we notice it or not, she is just as beautiful as the others, because, like her more popular sisters, she comes with a promise for longing eyes. Of course, this forgotten sister is Pentecost. But what promise does her beauty bring? We know Christmas brings the long-awaited promise of a Savior, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. We know that Easter brings the promise of life in an empty tomb and a living Jesus. But what does Pentecost bring?

Let's begin with Pentecost, the Jewish holiday taking place fifty days after the Passover, marking the end of the grain harvest. Jesus had commanded his disciples to remain in Jerusalem before his ascension into heaven. And even before his death and resurrection, Jesus promised at least five times to send his Counselor to them. But who could understand what he was meaning? It was ten days after his ascension, and there they were in Jerusalem, still confused with what Jesus had promised. And then they weren't.

We see three miraculous signs as they are gathered together on Pentecost. First, the sound of wind comes rushing through the room. But we don't hear that they feel the wind. They just see it. Second, what looked like tongues of fire rested on their heads. This fulfilled John the Baptist's prophecy, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." The Holy Spirit was pouring special blessings out on all the disciples there. This was not the gift of faith. They already had faith. This was something more. This baptism of the Holy Spirit (not to be confused with Jesus' baptism of repentance and forgiveness that we were baptized with) was the equipping they needed to carry out the Great Commission.

But there was a third miraculous sign. The followers of Jesus began to understand and speak the good news of Jesus in languages they were not accustomed to. And we know that because all the foreign Jews gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost could understand what they were saying in the visitors' native tongues. In fact, they asked the question: "Look, are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them speaking in his own native language?" The Holy Spirit was enlightening the hearts of the disciples with truth and giving them the means and boldness to share it.

As always, the response of the hearers was mixed. Some were amazed and wanted to know more. They asked the good Lutheran question, "What does this mean?" But some, in their ignorance, began to mock the disciples: "They are full of new wine."

Peter then stood to defend the believers. These people were not drunk. Instead, they were fulfilling the promise God gave through the prophet Joel. He prophesied that the Holy Spirit would be poured out for all people, and all believers would speak the word of God. He also promised that God would continue to rescue as he did in the days of Israel's captivity in Egypt, freeing them not with plagues, but with the good news of salvation in Christ. This salvation would be for all believers.

All God's people would speak God's word. That seems hard to believe. Maybe it even seems foolish. Would God really want all of his people proclaiming his praises publicly? How about the ones who were terrible public speakers? How about the ones who had a past? How about the ones whose past involved denying Jesus and lying by swearing they didn't know him? And yet, who stands to deliver this sermon? It's Peter, the one who heard the rooster crow.

Peter continued to preach beyond what we have in front of us from Acts 2 today, and when he got to the end of his sermon, convicting the people of their sins and showing Jesus as the Savior from sin, the listeners were cut to the heart: "Gentlemen, brothers, what should we do?" And what did Peter say? "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call." That day 3,000 were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection.

Language divided over human hubris to language united to draw all people into Christ's reign. Pentecost is the undoing of the Tower of Babel, our first reading today, where God stops man's rebellion against him by confusing their language. But what we see at Pentecost is God gathering all his people together to form his Church of all believers everywhere. Unlike the focus of our sermon from last week, though, on the unity that we have in Christ, the focus of Pentecost is on the gifts God pours out on his Church to preach that message of oneness in Christ.

But reading this section can certainly give us Pentecost envy. How special would it be if we had that miraculous evidence of the Spirit in the wind and the fire and the foreign tongues today? How incredible would it be to have three thousand baptized into Christ in our midst this morning. We may wish for wind, fire, and the tongues. It's easy to look longingly at the first Pentecost. And we might even be tempted to believe that, since

God has not come to us in wind, fire, and tongues today, maybe the gifts he has for us are worse. Or even more than that, we might be tempted to believe that the Holy Spirit has not poured out spiritual gifts on us at all. And if that's the case, what does it say about our faith?

Has the Holy Spirit ceased in pouring out gifts on his Church? Of course not! But that doesn't mean the gifts he gives us are the same as those he gives to the early Christian Church. In the early Church, a transition was taking place from the religion of the Old Testament, Judaism, to the religion of the New Testament, Christianity. Though we see plenty of differences between modern Judaism and Christianity, both fit like a glove together at that turn between waiting for the Savior and the Savior actually coming. For many Jews living in the first century, that conversion from Judaism to Christianity was about as big a life change as one could make. They were not just leaving their religion behind. They were leaving their traditions behind. They were leaving their families and communities behind, as they would no longer be welcomed with open arms. They were risking everything. And while this message of forgiveness in Jesus was great, how could they know it was true? Here the Holy Spirit steps in with these miraculous signs, drawing attention to those sharing the message and validating this message as one truly from God.

Today, our situation is different. In the early Church, dramatic signs helped confirm a new message in a time of transition. Today, we have God's completed Word, which stands as our sure foundation. While we cannot say that these apostolic gifts that are given here and other places in the early Church have been done away with, we can say why they are not as widespread. We do not need tongues and signs. We have God's word that we can point to.

The Church, as always, has what she needs for her time. The Holy Spirit does not let her go empty-handed. Instead, he continues to shower his Church with the spiritual gifts she needs to stand as a light for the dark world. He gives her his word, the map and compass that keep her sailing in right waters as she works to deliver her passengers to the shores of heaven. And along with his word, the Spirit gives to his Church the sacraments, signs and wonders for us, that may not look as miraculous as the wind and fire, but convey to us the same message of our certain belonging in God's kingdom. But what is the word of God without understanding? What benefit would it be to us if the Holy Spirit had not opened our eyes to not only study the scriptures, but understand them?

Shame on us when we take God's word and sacraments for granted. Shame on us when we let our Bibles gather dust on the shelf, or when we despise preaching and God's word by treating worship as something that we attend only if we've got nothing better going on, or when we see the Lord's Supper as anything less than the meal of forgiveness and grace that it is, where our Lord Jesus gives us his very body and blood for forgiveness and life and salvation, or when we treat baptism as a formality instead of the divine adoption service that it is. God gives his Church what she needs, but if her members take these Means of Grace for granted in their own lives, how can they expect to go and share them boldly?

And yet, even in this struggle too, the Holy Spirit provides for his Church what we need. He provides forgiveness for all the times we've taken his gifts for granted and despised his gospel message with apathy. He gives us new motivation, as the Spirit pours out his gospel again on our hearts, and we realize the lengths God went to rescue us from sin. And then he equips us, not with foreign tongues or the ability to do miraculous signs, but with understanding of his word, love for his message of reconciliation, and motivation to share the powerful gospel with those estranged from God. Friend, this is why we celebrate the third sister today, because today and always, the Spirit provides the gifts his Church needs. Put them to use Amen.