

“God’s Gift of the Spirit on Pentecost: Promise Fulfilled”

Acts 2:1-21; John 14:23-31

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When the risen and living Jesus appeared to the Apostles on the Day of Resurrection, He said this to them: “These are my words which I spoke to you while I was with you, that, it was necessary that all of the things that had been written in the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me be fulfilled. Then He opened their mind to understand the Scriptures.” And Jesus went on to say this: “Thus it has been written that the Christ suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance be preached in His name for the forgiveness of sins unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things [(speaking to the Apostles)]. And behold I will send the promise of My Father upon you. And you stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:44-49).

Today, with the Day of Pentecost in the church year, we commemorate and give thanks for the fulfillment of these words of the risen and living Christ. Luke tells us of the fulfillment of this in his account from Acts chapter 2. He tells us that when the Day of Pentecost had arrived, the Apostles were all together at the same place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven. It sounded like the rushing of a mighty wind. Then tongues of fire appeared over the head of each of the Apostles (Acts 2:1-3). The Holy Spirit, the promise of the Father, was being given. This was attested to on that occasion by these physical signs.

And then tongues of fire appeared over the head of each of the Apostles, and they began to speak in other languages, “as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4. ESV). The tongues of fire were tongues because they would speak God’s word in human speech. They were tongues *of fire* because the Holy Spirit is not passive. The Spirit is alive, as it seems that fire is. The Spirit consumes the heart and mind with repentance, faith, and conviction. He refines. He changes us toward God in humility and God’s love. He is the active agent. He sets on fire as we know how fire reproduces itself with respect to what it touches. These are also characteristics of God’s word as it is the same Spirit that gives God’s word and fills it.

The tongues of fire show us the opposite of dullness with respect to truth. They do not reflect apathy with respect to God’s word and Sacrament. They do not represent indifference to what is true and right. They represent compassion for the misery of humanity and real injustice. They do not involve apathy toward the lost condition of human beings without the truth of God’s word and the Gospel of Jesus.

This fire is full of enthusiasm, thanksgiving, and zeal for the profound reality of what God has done in allowing His Son to die a horrible death in bearing God’s wrath against our sin. In other words, this fire emblazons on our hearts and minds the realization of just how not self-interested God’s love really is; with how self-giving God’s love is, and how this love has won our forgiveness and the gift of life with God. This fire is filled with the praise and joy that Jesus lived again and still lives after dying that death and now reigns at the right hand of God.

This is the picture of Holy Spirit that we get with the imagery of the tongues of fire. It is also the picture we get of God’s word that is preached by the Apostles, because it is God’s word that happened when the Holy Spirit caused the Apostles to preach, according to Christ’s instruction and promise. When the Holy Spirit comes, God’s word happens, and there is a zeal a hunger for God’s word.

The tongues of fire were an outward sign of the inward reality on that occasion: The apostles “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). They were filled with the Spirit. So, what did they do? They spoke. How did they speak? Did they speak the imagination and feelings of their own hearts? Did they speak what accords with human reason? Did they speak what the crowd wanted to hear? Did they get their inspiration from the spirit of the world and the wisdom of men? Did they speak lawlessness and rebellion; “do your own thing.” Did they speak self-expression as the highest form of truth? Did they speak God loves you just the way you are so you can define truth for yourself? No. They spoke as the Spirit gave them utterance.

These things become evident in what Luke tells us the Apostle Peter said later. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter ultimately said to the crowd of the Jews who were gathered there that day: “God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). He also proclaimed to the Jewish ruling counsel some days later: “There is no other name under heaven, given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). This name is the name of Jesus because He will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). He is the Man on whom the God the Father laid our iniquity and whom He raised from the dead, who now reigns at God’s right hand.

These things about needing redemption from sin and that Jesus is Savior and Lord because He accomplished this redemption were not something the Jewish ruling counsel wanted to hear, and they gave orders, with the threat of punishment, to the Apostles that they were not to preach this name and these things. They thought they were justified in putting Jesus to death, but how wrong they were, since God rejected and reversed their judgment and actions and raised Jesus from the dead. The Spirit moved the Apostle Peter to tell them so. The Spirit does not respect and concede the way human beings think, according to their own feelings, lights, and agendas. The Spirit speaks the truth about us human beings and proclaims Jesus and the good news that Jesus is the Savior from sin and death.

Now here is a miracle. The Apostles spoke in other tongues, that is, languages. They spoke in the languages of the many visitors in Jerusalem that day. There were people gathered there for the Jewish feast of Pentecost from all over the Roman empire. These Galileans, the apostles, were speaking in the native languages of all those people. Those people were Judeans, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, a region of the world we would know as Iraq. Those people were from places in Asia Minor, what we would know today as Turkey. They were from Crete and Arabia. They were from Rome. There were also people there from Greece (John 12:20). They all spoke different languages.

What happened there would be like this. Suppose that we here were surrounded by people from all the parts of Europe, Africa, Middle and South America, the Middle East, and the Orient. Now suppose that we suddenly become able to speak God’s word of law and Gospel to them in French, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Polish, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Arabic, Persian or Farsi, and all the languages and dialects of the peoples of Africa and Middle and South America, and the indigenous peoples of North America. Suppose we are suddenly able to speak these languages without their being native to us, or without our having studied and learned them. This is what was going on in Jerusalem that day.

This leads me to speak for a moment about the tower of Babel in relation to the Day of Pentecost. The tower of Babel involved God multiplying the languages so that human beings could not understand each other. This was necessary at the time because humanity was arrogant and banding together to try to reach up to heaven by building a tower. They wanted to show God

that they were really something (Genesis 11:4). They wanted to reach heaven by their deeds and their own power. They were also afraid, afraid of being scattered over all the earth (Genesis 11:4). They were afraid because they did not believe God's pronouncement of blessing, even though God had told humanity in His blessing to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). God does not accept such arrogance and intention of human beings. He does not accept their trying to reach heaven in their own works, by their own strength, for their own glory. So, God confused human language by multiplying it so that they would not be able to cooperate in their faithless and arrogant endeavor.

Now on the Day of Pentecost God enables the Apostles to speak in all the languages of the human race, to speak the Gospel. Is this an overcoming of Babel? I have heard it said that it is. I question that, however, for this reason. It is because we do not see all human beings speaking one language once again on the Day of Pentecost. Speaking one language again would seem to be the true and complete reversal of God's judgment at Babel. That judgment will be reversed in Jesus, but when?

The picture of this reversal is in Revelation chapter 7 when all of those who have come out of the great tribulation are standing before the throne of God and the Lamb, dressed in white robes; the white robes symbolizing being holy and righteous before God. They come out of all of the nations and peoples of the human race. They are singing with one voice in one song praises to God and to the Lamb, having been cleansed in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:9-14). There God's judgment of Babel is no more.

But then also the remnant of humanity that has been redeemed in Jesus Christ will not be arrogant in trying to reach God by its own power and strength. There the remnant of humanity will be humble and in communion with God in faith and true righteousness, in joy and holiness, in peace and rejoicing in God. They will rejoice in God's presence because of what the Lamb has done. They will have reached heaven because God sent the Lamb, His Son, to redeem us and the Holy Spirit to teach our hearts repentance and faith in Jesus and to give us communion with God and eternal life through the Son in the Gospel.

In the mean time, that is in our time now, God overcomes the judgment of Babel in a certain way. This way is the teaching of the word of God. It is also teaching the word of God in all the languages of the world. It is the teaching of God from the Scriptures that we know in the commandments, and in the Creed. It is in the one baptism and in the one Holy Supper of our Lord, where He gives us His body and blood, the means by which He has redeemed us, which He calls the New Covenant. Though Christians confessing what God's word teaches speak different languages around the world today, they speak together the same word of God in the same confession. In this, for now, the judgment of Babel is overcome in the substance of our faith until God brings all of Christ's people together on the Great Day of the Lord in Christ's everlasting kingdom.

This reality is reflected in the other miracle that was present on the Day of Pentecost. This miracle was that the Apostles were speaking in those languages "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11). This is the "what," the content, or the substance of what they were preaching. Yes indeed the Holy Spirit's preaching has a content, a never changing substance. The Holy Spirit works zeal for speaking and teaching the Gospel. The Holy Spirit also gives substance. This substance is known in the Apostles' speaking and writing. And Acts 2 tells us that this substance is the "mighty works of God." In like manner, Jesus says this: "[The Holy Spirit] will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). Jesus said further: "[The Holy Spirit] will glorify me for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you"

(John 16:14).

And so the Father and Christ poured out the Spirit that day and sends the Spirit to work among us today. And the Spirit guides us into the truth as God's word teaches, or at least this is what the Holy Spirit wants to do. Let us not resist this work of the Spirit. For this is a work of the Spirit that will take us beyond our own understanding, feelings, and self-interests, to truth, humility, and restoring grace. He causes the speaking of the mighty deeds of God, depicted for us in the Scriptures, summarized for us in the Creeds that guide our understanding. These are the mighty deeds of Creation, of Redemption, of bringing the redemption into our hearing and sight in Jesus in the word of the Gospel, and in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Supper of Christ's body and blood. The Spirit creates fellowship with Christ through and in the Apostles' teaching in the Scriptures. He places for us here the forgiveness our sins, to give us the healing ointment of God's grace for our smarting conscience and our regret. He tells us the good news of His grace and care for us to apply medicine to our broken and hurting hearts. He tells us here once again that Jesus has taken your sins away and so God is our God and we are His people. The Spirit gives us the promise once again that God is with us always, and that nothing can snatch you out of His hand (John 10:28-29). He gives us the consolation and comfort of faith to believe these things and give peace to our hearts in the midst of a very troubled and violent world, and in the midst of our own trouble, stress, and strain.

So we rejoice today in the Spirit of God that the Father and the Son have given to us by grace, without our merit. And so we rejoice today also in God's word that the Spirit gives and give thanks for the truth and good news that God has put into our hands, our ears, and our hearts and minds. We give thanks for the Spirit as we rejoice in the Savior the Spirit proclaims, in whose name the Spirit brings the good news of God's grace and gives us the spiritual life of faith and serving God in Him. Thanks be to God for the Helper, the Spirit of truth, who leads us in Jesus, now and forever. "Rise, let us go from here" (John 14:31 ESV), in God's peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.