

5/31/2020

Scripture

Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **6** When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. **7** Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? **9** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome **11** (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" **12** Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Fire at Pentecost

For the last several weeks we have been working our way through Paul's letter to the Philippians, but today we are taking a quick break from Philippians to celebrate and remember one of our big Christian calendar holy days - Pentecost. If you were here in church with me, I'd ask you all what is the first thing that pops into your mind when you hear the word "Pentecost"? Maybe some of you might say "fire" or "languages" or maybe some of you might say "the color red" or "the birthday of the Church." Or maybe you're not sure what Pentecost is or you've heard of it before but can't quite remember much about it.

We find the recounting of Pentecost in the Book of Acts - remember when we read through Acts as a community together after Easter? The Book of Acts is full of stories about what happened right after Jesus' resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven. When the Book of Acts begins, it's clear that the people who know of Jesus' resurrection are his core group of disciples and followers. That core group got to see him during the 40 days after Easter when he stayed on earth in his resurrected body. And before Jesus ascended to heaven he promised the disciples something very important - the coming of the Holy Spirit. Actually, let's watch this video that will help us visualize what happened during the days leading up to and on the day of Pentecost... [play video]

You might remember seeing that video before when we were reading through Acts. One thing I really appreciate about what The Bible Project teaches us in that video is the emphasis on the symbol of fire. Fire is used throughout the Old Testament as a marker of God's presence - like in the video when they showed fire on top of Mt Sinai and then the pillar of fire on the tabernacle. We see throughout the Old Testament many times when God's presence is too strong, too untouchable that humanity can barely come in contact with Him. In the tabernacle with the early Israelites and then in the Temple with later Jews there was a room within the sacred building called the "holy of holies" which was the most sacred inner space where God's very presence resided. God's presence was so dangerously different from humanity that there needed to be

safeguards in place for God to dwell among the Israelites, so although God's presence was in the holy of holies, there were many outer courts and partitions that only certain people at certain times could enter safely.

But the New Testament introduces humanity to a new way of interacting with God's presence through the person of Jesus. In the Gospels we see in Jesus Christ God coming to dwell among His people, but this time, God comes so closely in contact with humanity that God and humanity come together in the flesh and blood body of Jesus Christ. God became man. With the birth and life of Jesus, God's holy and sacred presence was no longer only contained in the temple room of holy of holies. In Jesus, God's presence was in the human holy of holies, King of kings, and Lord of lords. And from what we know about Jesus' life, God's Holy Spirit worked in and through him to heal, teach, convict, and love the world around him.

And then finally, like we read in today's scripture passage, God's spirit and presence gets even closer to humanity. On the day of Pentecost Jesus' followers received the Holy Spirit, ushering in an even closer relationship to God's spirit and presence. They had tongues of fire hovering over their heads when the Holy Spirit came upon them. This symbol signified that the disciples - the followers of Jesus - they themselves were the place where the presence of God rested. No longer is God's presence only in the holy of holies. No longer is God's Spirit in the one man - Jesus of Nazareth. Beginning on the day of Pentecost, people like you and me can have God's Holy Spirit in us!

But all of this still might leave us with a “burning question...” get it? Why is fire a symbol for God’s spirit and presence? Well, Bible scholar and pastor Steve Seamands puts it this way: *“Fire in the scripture oftentimes represents the purifying, refining work of the Spirit. Fire burns down the dross and the scum and causes things that were impure to become pure...Something that is pure is something that is one thing and one thing only. Pure gold is simply gold and nothing else...but when we begin to try to follow Christ we begin to learn how impure we are, how divided we are. There’s a part of us that wants Christ but there’s a part of us that wants ourselves. So we often cry out with the Psalmist ‘Give me an undivided heart (a pure heart) that I might fear your name’...The Holy Spirit comes to make us pure. To get all of us lined up in the same direction. To give us a will that wants God’s will and not our own will. The Spirit can set us free from having to have our own way all the time. With all our hearts we can begin to want what God wants.”*

When the Spirit comes to dwell in us, God’s holiness comes into contact with the impure parts of our lives, attitudes, and behaviors, hopefully burning off those impurities and leaving us refined pure like gold. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us we can expect what we see in scripture to happen in our own hearts - we may be convicted of past sins and be led to repent and seek forgiveness; we may grow such a passion in our hearts about Jesus that we can’t keep in the Good News about him and we need tell others; we may be empowered to do miraculous things; we may begin to love others as Christ loves

them. And we may begin to be so different from the rest of the world that the fruit of the Spirit becomes noticeable in our lives - things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Holy Spirit works in us like fire - to purify our hearts.

Can you say that you are of one mind, totally free of impurities today? We need the power of the Holy Spirit to fall upon us as much as the Spirit did on the day of Pentecost. Where in your life will you welcome the Holy Spirit to work? What parts of your heart need to be touched by God's presence to be transformed? Let us be ready and welcoming to the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.

For our closing prayer I'd like to echo some of the words from our responsive reading we read earlier. As I read these words, I invite you to open your hands in a posture of surrender and welcome.

Come, Spirit of Truth, fill our hearts.

Come, Spirit of Life, change our hearts.

Come, Spirit of Love, soften our hearts.

Come, Spirit of Hope, heal our hearts.

Come, Spirit of Faith, strengthen our hearts.

Come, Spirit of God, move in our hearts.

Amen.