

“The Spirit Comes As Promised”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – May 19, 2024

John 15:26-27, 16:4-15

Not long ago while I browsing through the mindless cafeteria of TV and Netflix offerings, I happened upon an interesting TV preacher.

This one is dressed in a designer suit and is seated in the middle of an elaborate set. As music swells in the background, he beseeches the television audience to demonstrate their faith through “One Thousand Dollar Vows.” He offers to send prayer cloths in response to requests for healing. He preaches in animated fashion. After instructing ill viewers to place their hands next to their TV screens, he prays fervently. Suddenly in the midst of his impassioned petitions, he begins to utter syllables that sounded unfamiliar to me. He is speaking in tongues. I find myself scratching my head and asking, “What does this mean?”

Nearly two thousand years ago, Jesus’ followers were in Jerusalem, waiting as he had told them to do until they received power from on high. They were there when the day of Pentecost came around. In many ways it is like our Thanksgiving Day in November. But this day was marked, not by the Macy’s parade and the advent of Santa Claus, but by a sound from heaven like a rush of a mighty wind and the appearance of tongues of fire descending on the disciples. As they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other tongues and Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, --from across the mediterranean and throughout the Middle East – came together when they began to hear all the racket. Then they heard these Galileans strangely and miraculously speaking in their native languages and declaring that God was doing great and mighty acts.

They, along with a gathering crowd of curious onlookers, were amazed. They gasped and giggled and turned to each other and asked, “What does this mean?”

That question has baffled the Christian community to varying degrees throughout its history. The phenomenon called speaking in tongues was one of the first things the church started doing, and differs over. The Apostle Paul devoted three chapters of his first letter to the Corinthians to what was evidently a dispute over the gift of speaking in tongues and whether it was

superior to other gifts of the Holy Spirit. While Paul affirmed the gift, he stressed that it was NOT to become the basis for some Christians to believe themselves to be superior to other Christians and warned that it was a gift which could be disruptive and easily counterfeited.

Many of you may be aware of congregations and communities within today's church where speaking in tongues has led to disputes and divisions. You may have been approached by someone who attempted to persuade you that speaking in tongues is the true indication that the Holy Spirit is directing your life; that is, the proof that you are a Christian. Perhaps you have just heard some strange stories about it. In one form or another, the church has always been posing the same basic question. We have received the story of Pentecost, turned to one another and asked, "What does this mean?"

Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, gives us the answer to this question. Some of the more cynical onlookers explained the disciples' ecstatic behavior by proposing that they are filled with new wine. It is Peter who sets both the crowd and the record straight by announcing that the disciples were not drunk, but rather were living proof that the ancient prophecy of Joel had been fulfilled. That meant that God's Spirit was no longer to be conferred only on special persons who were called to carry out special tasks but was now poured out on all flesh. Everyone – young and old, male, and female, -- was to receive God's Spirit and be empowered to do God's work! Joel's prophecy was coming to pass as the Holy Spirit descended as a mighty wind and tongues of fire or as a descending dove.

Luke makes it clear that none of this has occurred because of the will or actions of the disciples. The miraculous events of Pentecost came entirely by the Power of the Holy Spirit as it was being poured out. The disciples were only able to speak in tongues as the spirit gave them utterance. The disciples are simply faithful channels through which the Holy Spirit moves.

Although we can see from this perspective what the gift of speaking in tongues at Pentecost meant to Luke, we are still left with the nagging question, "What does this mean?" What does it mean for our lives? For most of us, experiences with speaking in tongues, is as familiar to us as a three-dollar bill. What is this story trying to tell us?

While our experiences may not have included speaking in tongues, most of us can remember situations where we've sorely needed the right words to say, and

somehow, it came. Afterward, when reflecting on the situation, we realized that, in those moments, it was as though someone or something was speaking through us.

Most of us can remember times in our lives when we have been part of a group of people who came together and experiences a spiritual power which broke down the barriers which normally separated people. Like the Galileans and Parthians and Medes and residents of Mesopotamia who found themselves united by the gift of speaking in tongues, we have joined hands and hearts with those who once were strangers. Perhaps it happened when you came to church not really knowing what you were looking for and found a genuine family. Perhaps it happened at a prayer vigil where groups so different than what we are accustomed to joined one another in prayers for peace and songs of hope.

Whatever your experience was, it had at its source the pouring out of a power that is greater than our own. It is our faith tradition that tells us that these experiences are how you come to know what it means to be filled with the holy spirit. We do not make them happen. They are of God. We can only be ready and receptive as the wind of God moves through our lives and as that same spirit enables us to speak the language of love.

It is equally important to remember that such experiences tend to be unrepeatable. If you have ever returned to the site of a mountain top experience expecting to re-live the miracle that you'd experienced there before, then you know what I mean when I say that it is never the same.

You and I have known moments of indescribable love and joy because the same Spirit which moved into the life of our faith community on Pentecost is still at work in our lives. This gift of God is not by our own doing. We are simply called to trust God to send the Spirit when needed.

What happened on the day of Pentecost was unique in one sense. It was unique in that all the believers spoke in tongues.

In another sense, however, the day of Pentecost is a picture of what happens to all believers when we are filled with the Spirit. When believers are filled with the Spirit of God, we tell others about Jesus.

And as we tell others about Jesus, people are enlightened and warmed by the good news of the gospel. May God help us all to be filled with His Spirit so that the gospel can be proclaimed to all around us. Amen.