

PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-13ff.

“What does this mean?”

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.” And they should have been. Jesus had given them orders: *“Wait for the Holy Spirit to come.”* And so, they waited, together, as one people, as the church.

“Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.” Jesus had told them all the way back in the beginning, *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”* The Spirit often comes with breath or wind in Scripture. Both are necessary. Both make an impact. But both are also unseen. So also, even today, as the Spirit prepares to come visibly, He reminds the Church of His invisible nature, that most often He will act behind the scenes, though just as forcefully.

The disciples were sitting. Sitting is what passive people do. They weren't in the ready position. They weren't at the line of scrimmage. Yet the Spirit comes precisely when they're least prepared to act and acts through them. He plays their vocal chords like a piano. He controls the melody. He crafts the tune.

“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.” How do you describe the indescribable? Apparently, as tongues of fire. Why tongues? I don't know, but I suppose the Spirit is trying to not-so-subtly remind us that He's been sent to confiscate our tongues, to move them to speak about Jesus, oftentimes in ways and in places we've never imagined.

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” Notice, they speak in real languages. They don't babble nonsense. They don't flail about. They're not slain in the Spirit. No, they're brought to life.

They confess their faith boldly, openly, and understandably. The gospel is what matters, and the tongues are a vehicle to proclaim it. The gospel owns the tongues, and not the other way around. This is no willy-nilly, happy-clappy, holy-rolling charismatic service. No, this is old school Lutheran law and gospel, the kind so hard to find because so few have the ears to hear it or the guts to preach it. Read St. Peter's sermon and it leaves no doubt. All of this boiled down to Christ crucified for sinners, proclaimed in every language imaginable to be understood, to win hearts and not applause.

“Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.” Jesus had told them to go into all nations, and here He brings all nations to them. There is no one who should wonder, *“Is the gospel for me?”* The answer is always, *“Of course.”* If you have a forehead, Jesus wants to water it with His death and resurrection. If you have ears, the Spirit wants to fill them with the Word. God wants everyone under heaven to join Him in it. The Scriptures are clear on that, even if at times we aren't.

And how are we to get there? *“When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.”* *“Faith come through hearing.”* If we're to get to heaven, we're to hear. We're to hear and understand, which means the gospel must be preached loudly and clearly. It must never be assumed. It must force-feed. We must hear it. We have to hear it, or everything else is lost. The Spirit doesn't bring the circus to Jerusalem today; He brings a sermon. And that is what the Church is to be: a constant and unchanging sermon, the Spirit's voice, driving us ever closer to Christ our only Hope and Savior.

“Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?’” The Spirit did it. He got their attention, and He wasn't going to waste it. “How?” must quickly surrender to “What?” Forget how the apostles speak in such a way. Listen to what they say. Forget how the preacher preaches. Hear his preachment.

“Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’” And there you have it. This must always be the question. *“What does this mean?”* In every hour, in every situation, in every way we must ponder, *“What does this mean?”* And even when we don’t have all the dots, we can nonetheless connect them: this means everything.

We so often want to be the disciples in this text that we forget it’s better to be the crowd. It is always better to hear the gospel than to proclaim it, although we are called to do both. The Absolution always does more good for the one into whose ears it goes than for the one out of whose mouth it comes.

The greatest feat of this first festival of Pentecost is not that the disciples speak in foreign languages or that the Spirit descends with tongues of fire, but, rather, that sinners believe and are forgiven, that the wax of waywardness that so often plugs our ears is melted, so that those who had not before heard what God had already clearly said through Moses and the prophets now hear it clear as a bell: *“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem,”* St. Peter says, *“let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.”*

Listen carefully. This is not a lecture. This is a Spirit-sounded alert:

“Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”

That is what Pentecost is about, and that is the part of Pentecost that is to be repeated every year, every week, and every day. The Word is to be preached, no holds barred, with damning law and with saving gospel, and those who would find a home in heaven are to hear it. *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*

And notice what happened: *“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”* It’s a good question, and St. Peter gives a good answer. Learn it well. Live it well. *“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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

There you go: *“Repent and be baptized.”* Don’t analyze it; receive it. Don’t expect to understand it; believe it. *“Repent and be baptized.”* God would have you saved, and this is how He would save you. The drowning man doesn’t ask his rescuer why he chose the life preserver he chose. No, he grabs hold of it with all his strength.

Tears and water, water and tears, relived a thousand times in a lifetime; that is what God commends to us. Mourn over your sins. Drown them in your Baptism, not because Baptism is a get-out-of-jail-free card—there are plenty of baptized in hell—but because the same faith that receives Jesus receives Baptism and is saved, just as the same unbelief that rejects Jesus rejects Baptism and is lost, and vice versa.

Have you ever seen the cell phone commercials where their service cuts out just as someone says the most important thing? That is the case with Pentecost when we focus on what adorned the Word—the wind, the tongues, and so forth—instead of on the Word itself. The wind saved no one, but the Word did. The tongues saved no one, but the gospel preached in those tongues did. St. Peter saved no one, but Jesus did through St. Peter.

No offense to our Pentecostal or Baptist friends, but there is nothing Pentecostal about Pentecostals, just as there is nothing Baptist about Baptists. No, the real Pentecost is found in a pulpit, just as real Baptism is found in the font, the Spirit’s frontlines in the battle with the flesh, as God says what He says and gives what He gives, as simple words fill simple ears with simple faith, no questions asked, with *“Thus says the Lord”* the only answer. If you want experience Acts 2, listen. If you want be

baptized with the Spirit, expect to get all wet. And if you want greater gifts than that given the crowd today, namely, faith, you haven't listened at all, because you don't know what the greatest gift is.

May God grant me when I breathe my last more open ears than lips, that I might hear what the Spirit speaks today: *"Repent and be baptized."* And, as my tears remind me of the Word poured with water on my forehead, may I know that just what is needed has been provided, not by my own thinking or choosing, but by God's grace, Christ's work, and the Spirit's intercession. May God grant you the same. And, in the meantime, may the Spirit confiscate our tongues to grant the same to those around us. Amen.