

This evening we begin hearing the word of God from Acts 2 which describes the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church by the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. It happened on the day of Pentecost and so the term Pentecost has become the term that is often used to refer to this great turning point in the history of salvation. Like the birth of Jesus, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension, Pentecost is one of the great events that belongs to the plan of God for the salvation of the world. In particular it marks the beginning of the last great epoch in history before the return of Christ and the renewal of all things. It is the beginning of the period in history in which Christ is on the throne at the right hand of God establishing his kingdom on earth and gathering his people from all the nations of the world. It is the outworking of what Jesus accomplished during his time on earth. It is directly related to his ascension into heaven. The day of Pentecost was the day that Jesus from his throne in heaven poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church.

The word "Pentecost" in Greek means "fiftieth." It was one of the names given to a Jewish feast day that came 50 days after the Passover celebration. That Jewish feast day was also known as the Feast of Harvest or the Feast of Weeks. It was a celebration of the firstfruits of the harvest which was at the same time an anticipation of the full harvest to come. That suggests that the 3000 people who were added to the church on the day of Pentecost were the first-fruits of the full harvest to come. The result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church was preaching and witnessing about Jesus which resulted in 3000 people being added to the church in that one day. But that was just day one. The people who were saved on the day of Pentecost were the first fruits of the full harvest that would take the rest of history to complete. The preaching and witnessing and people being added to the church today is the continuation of what began on the Day of Pentecost.

There also seems to be a connection between Pentecost and the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. As we have seen Pentecost was held 50 days after the Passover. We already know that Jesus' death on the cross was the fulfillment of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. The parallel can be extended to the inauguration of God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai which involved the giving of the law - and the inauguration of the new covenant at which time the Holy Spirit was poured out to write his law on the hearts of his people. The NT writers delighted in making these kinds of connections because they help us to see how the events they were describing were all part of God's one plan of salvation. So what happened on the day of outpouring of the Holy Spirit can be seen as the first fruits of the full harvest of people brought into the kingdom and it can be viewed as a parallel to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai where the law that was given at Mount Sinai was now written on the hearts of the covenant people of God.

Next we will look at the first things that happened when Jesus sent down his Spirit from heaven. First there was the sound like a wind. Verse 2 says, "And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." The group who were together in that place was the 120 who had been gathered together praying and participating in the replacement of Judas by Matthias.

Suddenly they heard “a sound from heaven like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” There was no wind. Nothing blew over. No papers went flying. There was only a sound like a mighty rushing wind. That would have been frightening. Just imagine being in that group! They had been praying for the promise of the Spirit so they probably realized quickly what was happening. But it must have been an awe inspiring experience – hearing the sound of a hurricane or a tornado without there actually being a hurricane or tornado.

Now wind and spirit are closely associated in Scripture. In both the Hebrew of the OT and the Greek of the NT the same word is used for wind and for spirit. Jesus makes use of this association between wind and spirit in John 3:8 where he says, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Many commentators believe that we should see a connection here with the fact that the Holy Spirit was involved in the original creation. If we see a connection between the activity of the Holy Spirit at the original creation and the activity of the Spirit at Pentecost then we understand what is going on at Pentecost as the beginning of the new creation.

The Bible speak of the Holy Spirit in connection with creation. Genesis 1:2 says, “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” David in 2 Samuel 22:16 uses more forceful language. “Then the channels of the sea were seen; and the foundations of the world were laid bare, at the rebuke of the Lord, at the blast of the breath of his nostrils.” Many commentators see part of the wind symbolism at Pentecost as a signal that what is happening here is the beginning of the new creation.

Whether that is so or not, the sound of a mighty rushing wind, symbolized the powerful presence of God. It was awe-inspiring which is what the presence of God often does in Scripture. Jesus had promised that the apostles would receive power from on high and the sound that symbolized the coming of the Spirit was the sound of a mighty rushing wind. We know what might rushing winds can do. They are very powerful and so this sound of a mighty rushing wind was a sign of the powerful presence of God through his Spirit.

Next we have what appeared to be divided tongues of fire. Verse 3, “And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them.”

Now John the Baptist had prophesied that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This is the most obvious background that helps us to understand the significance of the divided tongues as of fire that rested on each of the disciples on the day of Pentecost. The significance of the fire in John the Baptist’s teaching is God’s judgment upon those who refuse to repent. Right after saying that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, John continues in Luke 3:17, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” It seems likely then that the tongues as of fire on the Day of Pentecost had some reference to the judgment of God.

However, it was clearly not the judgment of God upon the disciples. The fire did not harm the followers of Jesus. It was a sign of Jesus' blessing them with the Holy Spirit. The reason that the fire of God's judgment did not harm the disciples is that Jesus by his death on the cross had experienced the fire of God's wrath in the place of his people. Back in Luke 12:49 Jesus said, "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished." Jesus experienced the baptism of fire when he suffered and died on the cross. And so the tongues as of fire did not harm to the disciples. They are associated with the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

However, the message that the disciples were to preach would include a warning of judgment. The message of Jesus is a message of salvation for those who believe in Jesus, but it is at the same time a message of warning and judgment upon those who refuse to come to Jesus for that salvation. It is likely that the tongues as of fire preserved the idea of John the Baptist that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The gospel saves. But it also condemns those who refuse it. Paul would later express this idea without the fire imagery in 2 Corinthians 2:15–16, "¹⁵For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?" So the tongues of fire indicates that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was about both salvation of sinners and judgment on the wicked who refused to repent.

It is also significant that the "divided tongues as of fire appear to them and rested on each of them." That means that they all received the Holy Spirit. This is a huge part of the significance of Jesus pouring out the Holy Spirit upon his people. In the OT period the Holy Spirit was not poured out on all the people. He was active in the OT period, but his ministry is mentioned mostly in connection with equipping leaders to do their work. It seems that he was active less powerfully and in far fewer of the people. For much of the OT, the majority of the covenant people of God lived wicked lives and those who did serve the Lord were often a remnant. One of the key emphases concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was that he was poured out on all believers. When Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on the basis of his completed work on earth, there was a dramatic change in the degree to which the Spirit worked in the people of God. And part of that dramatic change was the fact that all believers received this indwelling of the Holy Spirit – this higher level of Holy Spirit empowerment.

And that is a very important part of the NT teaching about the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul asks the Corinthian believers, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" And that is the basis for the commands to live holy lives of love. Every single believer in Jesus has the Holy Spirit living in them. And that great reality began on the day of Pentecost and the point is made a number of times in the story of Pentecost that the Spirit came upon all of Jesus' followers.

The fact that the tongues as of fire were divided simply means that there was not one big tongue but rather multiple little tongues. The wording makes it sound like each of the little tongues was a divided tongue, but that is not the case.

So there was the “sound like a mighty rushing wind” and there were “tongues as of fire ... rest[ing] on each one of them.”

Verse 4 goes on to say, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

One of the things that we must understand is that, in these opening chapters of Acts, there are many different words used to describe the Holy Spirit coming upon the believers. In verse 4 we are told that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” Later on in this chapter Peter quotes from the prophet Joel who had prophesied of God’s promise, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” Back in chapter 1, Jesus used the language that John the Baptist had used, “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” He also said in 1:8, “[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” All of these are different ways of saying the same thing. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit from heaven and the Holy Spirit began to dwell in the hearts of believers to give them the power to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. And that includes the whole life of obedience and service. And the Bible uses many different terms to refer to that receiving of the Holy Spirit.

What happened at Pentecost is the same thing that happens to every believer except for the miraculous signs and the speaking in tongues. Some of what happened that day was for that day only as it was a major turning point in God’s plan of salvation. But the main thing that happened – the people of God receiving the Holy Spirit – that happens to every believer. Later on in this chapter, near the end of his sermon Peter promises that those who repent and are baptized will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The day of Pentecost brought about a new state of affairs in which all believers are baptized with the Holy Spirit or filled with the Holy Spirit or receive the Holy Spirit. This is an important part of what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ after Pentecost.

Now the speaking in tongues. Verse 5 mentions that the believers “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. The next paragraph describes the nature and the significance of the tongue speaking. Because Pentecost was a feast time, there were a lot of pilgrims in Jerusalem. Luke describes them as “devout men from every nation under heaven.” That is not to be taken literally. There were probably no Mexicans there. But there were devout people from many places and they represented the whole world as far as the meaning of this event was concerned.

Somehow what was going on among the disciples of Jesus caught the attention of many of these pilgrims and a crowd gathered and the people heard the disciples speaking in their own languages. There were a lot of languages represented and everyone was able to hear what the disciples were saying in their own language.

This was a miracle of speaking. The disciples were able to speak in languages that they had not known before and everyone in the crowd could hear the message in his own language. Luke does not discuss the logistics of this. Probably they split up onto groups according to language.

Luke mentions quite a list of places from which the speakers of different languages came. They come from a lot of different places. There are enough places mentioned that the claim that they came from every nation under heaven was meaningful even if it was not intended to be taken literally. The world, as far as the people of Jerusalem were familiar with it, was represented.

The main point of this as far as the history of salvation is concerned is that this was a reversal, at least symbolically, of the curse of God in connection with the tower of Babel. That story is told in Genesis 11. The people of the world at that time had only one language. They were working together to build a tower with its top in the heavens. Behind that project was a wicked desire to make a name for themselves. God judged them by confusing their language so that they could not understand each other anymore. So people were spread all over the earth because of all the different languages. The spreading apart was the result of God's judgment upon their pride. Sin always separates. God grace always brings people together.

What happened on the day of Pentecost then is a reversal of what happened at Babel. Symbolically God removed the barrier between people because of different languages. Symbolically the gospel was preached to all the nations. And the symbolism was that the people of God, at least, would be united rather than divided.

David Peterson explains, "God was expressing his ultimate intention to unite people 'from every tribe and language and people and nation' (Rev. 5:9-10; 7:9) under the rule of his Son (Eph. 1:9-10) providing reconciliation through him and 'access to the Father by one Spirit' (Eph. 2:14-18)." (*Commentary*, p. 136) And Sinclair Ferguson writes in his book on the Holy Spirit, "The effects of Babel were thus arrested. Now the word of reconciliation will be preached in many languages since the disciples have received the promised power of the Spirit to enable them to be witness to Christ all over the world (Lk 24:48; Acts 1:4) (p. 60).

So the speaking in tongues on the day of Pentecost was a sign that in this new epoch of God's plan of salvation, the gospel was to go out to all the world in the power of the Spirit. And that in turn was rooted in Jesus' command before his ascension that the disciples were to be his witnesses to the end of the earth. And that in turn was related to Jesus' teaching that as a result of his life, death, and resurrection, "All authority in heaven and on earth [had] been given to [him]." Jesus ascended into heaven and took his place at the right hand of his Father. From there he send down his Spirit. And the Holy Spirit enabling the disciples to speak in tongues was a sign of calling of the disciples to witness of Jesus' Lordship to the whole world.

The speaking in tongue then highlights the importance of missions – of witnessing to the reality of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord to all the nations of the world. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost with the resulting speaking in tongues shows us how fundamental the call to bring the gospel to the nations is

to the mission of the church. In our day the nations are both in far away places and in our own communities. And we are called and equipped by the Holy Spirit to bring the good news of Jesus to them both near and far. If we look at how this is worked out in the rest of the book of Acts and in the rest of the NT, it is clear that this involves the sending out of missionaries who are supported financially and in prayer by existing churches. But it also involves witnessing to Christ by our lives and by our words as we interact with people from the world in our every day lives. The great significance of the speaking in tongues on the day of Pentecost was that they were a sign that the curse of Babel has been reversed and that the gospel was now to be brought to all the nations.

One of the implications of this is that God values all the nations of the world. It is his plan that people from all the nations will be included in his kingdom. That highlights how contrary to God's will racism is. The fact that people from all nations are equally valued by God is rooted in the fact that all human beings are made in the image of God. But the fact that the gospel of Jesus is to go to all the nations further underscores the fact that God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" as Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:4.

The question remains whether speaking in tongues was a temporary supernatural gift given to mark a significant turning point in the history of redemption or a permanent gift that God intended his church to have for all of its existence. The answer is that it was a temporary gift that was given to the church during this great turning point in the history of redemption. It is important that we realize that even in Bible times, the vast majority of miracles happen during important turning points in the history of God's dealings with his people – the time of Moses and the conquest, occasionally in the period of the judges, during the time of Elijah and Elisha and then during the time of Christ and the early church.

During most of the story that the Bible tells miracles did not happen. Even within the NT itself, in the later books, miracles are not mentioned. That does not mean that God never does miracles outside of these periods, but they are not intended to be part of the ongoing life of the church. So it is with speaking in tongues. It was a sign relating to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is mentioned a few more times in the NT. But as the NT story progresses, it fades away indicating that it was meant as a sign to confirm the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and not something that was intended to be a permanent part of the life of the church.

Finally we have Luke's description of the initial responses of the people to what happened on the day of Pentecost. Verse 12-13, "And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others mocking said, 'They are filled with new wine.'"

There will be more responses to the gospel described in the book of Acts. The two mentioned here are amazement and perplexity on the one hand and mockery on the other. It is not surprising that people were amazed and perplexed by what they were witnessing. God was at work in a spectacular way and the meaning of it was not apparent all at once. This is still one way that people might initially respond to the gospel

message even though it does not come with miracles today. It is still an amazing and perplexing message. It is an amazing message in that it is about the true God who created all things by his powerful word and it is about his amazing grace in salvation in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is about the forgiveness of sins. It is about a living relationship with the true God. And while being amazement and perplexity is not yet salvation, such people are not far from salvation.

But there are also mockers. People who won't even consider the claims of the gospel. They just make fun of those who believe it. Such people reject it. And they are always part of the context in which the gospel goes forth.

Let us think about our response to the beginning of the story of Pentecost. We are in a different place than the people whose responses are recorded in these verses. But one thing that Luke's interest in these responses reminds us is that we always do respond to the word of God when it is proclaimed. Either we believe it or we don't. Either we act on it or we don't.

And certainly one of the responses that Luke is seeking of his readers here is excitement about the gift of the Holy Spirit and the possibilities for mission because of the reality of his power in the members of Christ's church. Jesus Christ is on the throne. He has sent his church into all the world to bring the gospel. And he has send his Spirit to empower us in the fulfillment of his mission. Luke would have his readers be re-invigorated by this story of Pentecost. The building of the church is the work of the ascended Lord Jesus, through his Spirit who empowers his people. Let us give ourselves to contributing to the mission of the church knowing that the Holy Spirit is in us equipping us to do what we could never do on our own.