



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

WHITSUNTIDE. (Pentecost), May 10th, 2008

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The event we call Pentecost is a part of salvation-history and fulfilled prophecies that date back to the eighth century before Christ. It was the second of three annual festivals of the Jews. Passover was the first, and the feast of Tabernacles was the last. It took place on the fiftieth day following the first day after Pentecost, and was known as the Feast of Weeks, as well as the first-fruits of harvest.

On this particular Pentecost the followers of Jesus were "all together in one place." Luke says in Acts 1:14 that they had gathered to pray. Suddenly, a mighty wind swept into the room. It was as though they had been hit by a tempest. A fierce gust of rapidly moving air filled every corner of the room in which they were sitting. This was the breath of God, and a fitting symbol of the Spirit whose nature and work it represented.

This audible sign was followed by a visible one. A column of golden light separated into dancing flames that rested upon every head. They were baptized with Holy Spirit and fire. The fire stood for the holiness of God, just as when Moses saw a bush that glowed with flames that engulfed it without consuming it. The Spirit is given to cleanse, purge and purify.

Luke tells us how these people were "filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." They were encircled by crowds of people, most of them Jews of the diaspora.

Luke says, "they spoke in **other** tongues." There are two words for "other" in the New Testament. *Allos* and *Heteros*. *Allos* means another of the same kind. *Heteros* means another of a different kind. *Heteros* is the word used here. We must also pay close attention to what Luke actually reports in verse 6. Those who

heard the speech in their own dialects heard **all** the disciples speaking not just some of them. They were amazed that they **all** spoke in their dialect. Furthermore, Luke uses the word *diaclectos*, from which we get dialect. Annie Hawkins will tell you, if you ever go to Wales you'll discover the significance of that. You can drive over a mountain and hear people talk as though they came from another country. In other words, the miracle was such that those who could understand the Apostles did not just hear speech in their own language group, but in their specific dialect within that language group.

What I'm saying is this; it wasn't that people heard this one speaking in one language, and someone else speaking in another. One of the reasons for their amazement was that each of them heard all of the church speaking in their particular dialect. This was both a miracle of speech and a miracle of hearing. It signaled one of the aspects of the work of the Spirit that is very important, namely his sovereignty.

It is important to note that not all these people were unanimous in their judgment. While some could hear ordinary Galileans speaking in their particular dialect, others in verse 13, heard nothing but the babbling of drunkards. If we heard people preaching in French, German, Russian and Yiddish, we wouldn't go on our way complaining that they were drunk. We would say they were preaching in French, German, Russian, and Yiddish, and we could not understand them. What made the difference was the sovereign Spirit. Those who heard the church in plain speech, heard because of the sovereign disposition of the Spirit.

This is what made Pentecost unique. It also spoke to another glorious aspect of the covenant or "age" it introduced. You remember in Genesis how God

confused the languages of the world. We call it the Tower of Babel. Ever since then people have been divided by language. They still are. Shortly following that event God called Abram and turned his seed into a great nation. His focus rested on one people. With few notable exceptions the rest of the nations were confined to spiritual darkness. That is, until Jesus came!

Pentecost marked the end of that situation. God was saying that his people would no longer be identified by a language or a piece of real estate. He was doing something new. His people would be gathered from every nation under heaven. That's what we mean by the 'holy catholic church.' Jews and Gentiles equal partners in the new humanity of which Jesus is the elder brother.

Before we conclude we must turn to one other aspect of this unique event, which in many respects is the most critical, at least from a practical point of view. You see, while Pentecost itself will never be repeated, and does not require repetition, one aspect of it is every Christian's birthright. The breath of God not only filled the house, it also filled the people.

I must also emphasize that what Luke describes did not become a permanent state or condition for these people. It was not once and for all. Indeed, it was repeated on several occasions. People who were filled with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost were filled again later. An example is St. Peter in Acts 4:8, where just as he was about to address the Sanhedrin he was once again filled with the Spirit, and spoke out of that fullness.

I know of no more pernicious doctrine than that which says that this kind of experience was limited to these early Christians. That is to rob the people of God of their birthright. There are countless thousands of people throughout the history of the Christian Church, and in the Church today who can testify to the reality of being filled with the Holy Spirit. For some, there was a terrible sense of emptiness in their lives until the fullness of God rushed in. Others yearned to glorify God in the lives they lived, and prayed until the Spirit flooded them with the presence of the Father and the Son. You may have a longing to be used more effectively in sharing the gospel of the grace of God. Well, the answer to that is also this outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When one is filled with the Spirit, every part and aspect of life is suffused with a profound sense of the presence of God.

I am afraid that we have given a false impression to the world of what the Church is called to be. People seem to think it's a religious club, one among others, a safe place to sing religious songs and feel a little better about ourselves. This is why a return to the book of Acts is so critical. The picture we have of the church there is of a community where people are ravished with the love of Jesus, and intoxicated with the Spirit of God. It's a place where worship is not a ritual to go through, but a powerful encounter with the living Christ.

What we do for God that is lasting we do in the power of the Holy Spirit. Oh, that we might be brought to see this. What we need is an outpouring of the Spirit like this, a move of God that reorients our entire way of thinking about ministry and everything else in life. That is what the Church needs. As long as we trust in our own devices and powers we shall accomplish nothing that is lasting or significant for the kingdom.

My friends, for many, religion is background noise to an otherwise busy and prosperous life. What is it that occupies the center of our lives? Is it Christ? Is it the fellowship of his Church? Is it His Word? Christianity is not something you keep on reserve for seasons of suffering. It's not like dialing 9-1-1 when you're in trouble. The Christian life is the very opposite of that. It is about the life and vitality of the Spirit filling every mental and spiritual faculty and charging them with grace and power.

I will let Jonathan Edwards have the last word. The young preacher from Yale wrote, "The Holy Spirit, or the third person of the Trinity, in his operations and fruits is the sum of the blessings that Christ purchased for us in the work of our redemption." You see, he's not a small part of it. He's the sum of it—"the sum of the blessings that Christ purchased for us." This is why it is incumbent upon us to seek God for greater and greater effusions of his gifts and graces. May we never become complacent. May God forgive us for putting up with the good when we could have the best.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.