

Spirit of the Living God 2020
Acts 2:1-21 Philippians 4:4-8

Acts 2:1-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." ¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Philippians 4:4-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

The most powerful, transformational & healing truth I know is that
 God wants a relationship with us, even with sinners & failures,
 even after we stray from obedience to God's will, way & truth.
 God's abiding love remains for his people, for **that is God's nature**,
 with mercy to restore and redeem the broken, the distant and lost.

The message of Pentecost is that continuing power of gracious love,
 come home to your God, and your life will never be the same again.

That is the Gospel message of God's mercy and invitation,

**for all to receive its transforming and healing power,
and then let it flow through us out into all the world...**

... and that is the work and ministry done by the Holy Spirit,
the presence of God in us and with us and all around us,
who can accomplish **through us** more than we thought possible.

Consider the example of Peter ---

who on the night when Jesus was betrayed and arrested,
was so weak & fearful that when questioned by a slave girl,
that he denied with a curse even knowing who Jesus was.

But listen again to the change on Pentecost, vs.1-4, 14, 21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd, "... let this be known to you, and listen to what I say ... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

The rush of wind and the appearance of fire

have represented the active and mighty power of God
at various times all through the witness of Scripture, such as-

- the wind or Spirit of God moving over the abyss before Creation,

Genesis 1:2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

- in Noah's time, the wind God sent to drive back the flood waters,

Genesis 8:1 And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided;

- the wind separating the sea to be crossed during the Exodus,

Exodus 14:21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.

- And the fire of the burning bush at the call of Moses,

Exodus 3:2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

- the pillar of fire guiding the Israelites through the wilderness,

Exodus 13:21 The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night,

- the fire from heaven the burned the alter Elijah had built,

1 Kings 18:38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.

**** All of these are examples of the powerful transforming presence of God.**

Or consider the early Christian Church.

To me, one of the most miraculous stories of the Bible,
is the remarkable emergence of the apostolic church.

When Jesus ascended to the Father the disciples were lost & confused.

They went back to Jerusalem, and **that terrified little band**
was just trying to survive by avoiding any public notice...

... as they remained huddled together behind locked doors,
afraid of arrest or whatever else might happen next.

And then what an abrupt and total change on that day of Pentecost,

as the very power and presence of God
came through like a rushing wind and tongues of fire,
just like the examples of wind and fire in the OT,
sweeping through in way that could not be restrained...

...transforming them into a committed people – a community of believers
who wouldn't **let anything keep them from proclaiming the gospel,**
the mercy of God to heal & redeem the broken, the distant & lost.

In Acts we read about the early Christian church **that was on fire,**
with a boldness and courage that overcame even the Roman Empire,
as through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit they
communicated the gospel across all barriers of separation & division.

We celebrate Pentecost as a living **vision of God's Kingdom.**
the agenda of Jesus Christ to heal, bless and save humankind,
as we are invited and open to the Spirit of God leading us
as the flame of God's love burns & blows through our lives ...

...which comes as a gracious kindness and gift from God, that follows
the same pattern of God's grace we see in the gospel story itself.

God saves us even before we live good and obedient faithful lives.

By grace, first God loves us, and accommodates us,
as through Jesus Christ, **God reaches down to us...**

... overcoming our sin and failures with redeeming gracious love

and placing the Holy Spirit in each of us, **to help us follow.**

The Pentecost event was truly God's kindness & gift, **a sign of grace,**
that the very diverse crowd were all able to hear the Good News
of God's love for them **spoken to them in their own language.**

* It is important for us **to grasp the significance of this ---**
the listener doesn't have to learn the language of the speaker,
because the speaker accommodates the language of the listener.

The miracle of Pentecost is that once again, **God happened** wind & fire.
God's gracious divine love reaching out to everyone,
with the message of the gospel, that goes beyond any one language,
**and that transformed the followers of Jesus Christ
into the bold and enduring early Christian church.**

The point is that the church of Jesus was equipped at Pentecost,
blessed and enabled to speak to those all around them,
and **to communicate God's love in ways they never could before.**

Pentecost is God's beckoning call to all his beloved people,
*"come on back home ... for all is forgiven in Jesus Christ
believe and respond --- that God is up to something great,
and that your life won't ever be the same again..."*
... for when God sends forth his Spirit amazing things happen,
for that is the power to change everything – **even you and me.**

Also important, Pentecost is not just a one-time event of long ago,
but the power & Spirit of Pentecost are still present and at work,
and still accomplishing God's grace and transformation...
... God's Spirit, bringing hope and renewal, redemption and new life.

We worship to celebrate God's gifts & blessings, new possibilities,
and that we are part of something mysterious, awesome & wonderful,
**for God is still very much at work and accomplishing,
still seeking the lost and transforming human lives,
and even better, inviting us to enjoy, grow & participate.**

Pentecost becomes real to us as we allow the Holy Spirit
room enough to work in us and flow out into the world.
And one of the transforming experiences for me during seminary
was when I got to know an amazing Christian named Mary.
I met her while I was serving as a hospital chaplain in Richmond.

Mary was strapped in a wheel chair to keep her upright,
hooked up to all sorts of medical equipment and monitors,

and slumped over as she sort of smiled up at me.
Her face was horribly deformed, part of it was missing,
and I never did learn the full extent of her injuries & suffering.

Her appearance was shocking, and I immediately felt sorry for Mary,
physically deformed, restricted to living life in a wheel chair,
and as a nurse explained, **in constant and untreatable pain.**

But as I began to include Mary in my regular hospital rounds,
I came to greatly admire her faithfulness **rather than pity**
this most remarkable and godly and gentle Christian woman.

She was a favorite among the staff, nurses and doctors, for she was
a warm, contagiously happy, and joyfully content human being,
who rather than any complaining or bitterness,
managed to convey and spread her gift and grace
of gentleness, joy and laughter to all around her...
... and it was incredible how wonderful a visit with her made me feel.

The one drawback, a visit and prayer with Mary was never a short one,
because she always had a long list of thanking God for blessings,
and other patients she'd insist that I needed to visit first.

Over the years since seminary I've often thought about Mary,
for **her life seemed to exemplify the power & promise of Pentecost,**
the Holy Spirit present, at work and flowing through someone,
transforming God's people and transforming situations...
... in amazing and joy-filled ways I wouldn't have thought possible.

I believe that Mary was able to be so consistently joyful,
to endure such extreme suffering and pain in her life,
and even to minister joy and love to others around her,
because by faith, she clung to God, and she stayed near her Lord.

By living her life near to the Lord and filled with the Holy Spirit,
she was able to love and trust God, her companion, completely.
And she looked for quite intentionally,
to notice the good and blessings of God all around her,
so that she could thank and praise the Lord for it...

... which shifted her focus off of her own self and her troubles,
and onto God-centered gratitude and joy, creating in her,
a deep contentment and compassion for other people.

This, I believe, is the point that Paul was making
to the Philippians in the passage we read earlier today.

The apostle is writing from a terrible place of suffering,
he is a prisoner in chains under the threat of execution.

And yet he writes, vs. 4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In ministry, I have seen considerable human suffering and tragedy,
and, "rejoice", or "thanksgiving", or "praise God"
are not normally the words I hear when someone talks about it.

But I have observed that when trouble or crisis do strike,
that some people will remain crushed and become embittered,
while others manage to endure with truly amazing grace,
and with unimaginable faith, courage and strength.

And yet this isn't determined by the severity of their situation,
as much as it is, **a reflection of their own heart and attitude.**

I see folks for whom
the least little thing will throw them off and they fall apart,
while others somehow withstand unbelievable blows and
keep on singing joyfully and praising God's goodness.

This is in no way about a false or blind refusal to face reality,
and Paul is not saying just smile anyway and try to be happy.

The secret? Notice that Paul does not write, "rejoice always",
but rather his words are, "rejoice **in the Lord** always."
The presence of Lord is the critical factor
who makes the 'rejoice' amid trouble a possibility.

Paul is saying that because the Lord is near and we know it,
because of who God is, God's promises and what God does,
that power of Pentecost defeats our anxiety and fear.

Paul's greatest joy was derived through his assurance from God,
that nothing in all of creation can separate us
from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord ...
... for what really matters, **is that we belong to God!**

Actually, the joy that Paul is describing,
is **a bold and defiant joy**, despite any external circumstance,
because even amid our worst calamity or disappointment,

**by faith, we know that God's love will sustain
and support us through whatever comes our way...
... because by faith God's Holy Spirit always brings us through.**

Following Paul's example of joy and peace despite a prison cell,
my friend Mary, even amid terrible suffering in the hospital,
she graciously and joyfully lived out Paul's words, vs. 8

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever
is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.

I cannot explain it, but this I know and I promise that it's true,
that if we will focus our attention and attitude
upon catching glimpses of God's love and grace,
and focusing on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit,
so that we can thank, honor and praise the Lord,
then surely the gift of joy will overtake us.

That's what happens when we allow God, the Holy Spirit of Pentecost
to do wonderful works of mercy, grace and compassion **through us.**

Today we celebrate God's Holy Spirit, available and always with us...
... the power of Pentecost to guide and empower us beyond what we are,
to deepen our spiritual walk with Jesus our Lord,
as together we seek the Lord, **to recommit and serve.**

**Today, let us be infected by the Spirit of the living God afresh,
and pour out our hearts, open our hurts & wounds to God's healing
that we might grow toward Christ and his gracious ways.**
**Thanks be to God
for the Holy Spirit present and at work among us all.**