

“FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT”

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 2:1-21

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The insurance industry used to refer to them, and maybe still does, as “acts of God.” Floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wild fires: those who experience these things have their lives turned upside down. Nothing is the same. Everything changes.

Scripture describes one such incident in Noah’s salvage operation during the great flood. He, his family, and representatives of the animal world make a new beginning as they exit the ark. God seems to use disaster to reset a creation that had wandered from God’s intention for it. For the most part, after this, crisis arises in the life of God’s people through human activity rather than natural disaster. Egypt enslaves Jacob’s descendants after a lengthy stay. Several hundred years later, the northern kingdom of Israel falls to Assyria as punishment for their disobedience and worship of idols. Judah falls to Babylon about 150 years after that for the same reason. Though Israel never again achieves independence within the biblical history, the prophetic and apocalyptic literature speak of a day when God will come and establish a people, a day accompanied by earthquakes and war and rumors of war.

It’s interesting to note that when God appears to Elijah, we are explicitly told that God is not in the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire, but in the still small voice or sound of sheer silence, depending on which translation you read. At Pentecost, there is also a mighty wind, clearly intended to recall the mighty wind that swept over the waters of the earth prior to creation. The Hebrew word, *ruach*, means wind, breath, and spirit. The tongues of fire also indicate the presence of the spirit, but neither the wind nor the fire are destructive forces; instead they mark a new creation. As with Elijah, the wind only draws attention to the nearness of God. The fire tells us that God is here, but God is neither in the wind nor the fire. The spirit fills the disciples, is in them, inhabits them... giving them the ability to see the activity of God and to speak of that power being released into the world in the various languages of the people there. This pouring out of the spirit is what we remember and celebrate each Pentecost.

This is my sixty-fifth Pentecost. I don’t think I’ve missed celebrating more than a handful of them in church. So far, no wind, no flame, no unscripted foreign languages. No one would accuse any of the celebrants of “being drunk with new wine.” I love the streamers, enjoyed the balloons from previous celebrations. The energy that congregations bring to this day is definitely a highlight of the church year. I love this day, but sometimes, probably most times, it feels like the celebration of a birthday, when it should be marking a birth. Something new came into the world on that first Pentecost. I wonder, have we grown so use to the Spirit’s indwelling that we no longer recognize God’s deeds of power? Have we grown weary of dreams and visions?

Of course, there's something unfair about these questions. We should not expect an outpouring of the Spirit just because the church has designated this day as Pentecost. That sounds a little like accusing God of being late for the party. And yet, Isn't this what a church fundamentally is: a people filled by the Spirit envisioning something new for a broken world? So what do we do with the dissonance we sometimes feel between the description of Pentecost in Acts and our experience of Pentecost today?

The first thing to say is that the "filling with the spirit" that we experience today is not new to us. The stirrings of the Spirit, if less miraculous than the first Pentecost, may yet be more familiar to us today. We may not proclaim the mighty deeds of God in languages unknown to us, but we recognize the presence and love of God active in our lives. Filled with the spirit, we see God in the comforts given and received in the past week. We gather each week to offer up our thanks and praise for God who heals, who counsels, who opens paths for justice, who speaks hope into despair. Our praise on Pentecost and on every Lord's day, is not a mere remembrance of God's love delivered in times past, but a present celebration of the love we experience.

Pentecost reminds us that God stretches the boundaries of convention. Filled with the spirit, our children offer a prophetic word, our youth see visions, our elderly dream, even those held in bondage speak a word from the Lord. The Spirit is poured out on all flesh. The church was so foolish to think that God would not call a woman, that a gay man stood under the judgment of God. We do well to remind ourselves that the spirit fills the poor, the hungry, the uneducated, the underprivileged, the outcast, even the sinner. We are urged to welcome the stranger, as Hebrews reminds us, for in doing so we may entertain angels. The Galileans were a surprise to the residents of Jerusalem. They could not imagine that these country bumpkins might speak a word from God. Today, we recognize that God still speaks through unexpected people.

The first Pentecost introduced to the children of God the visionaries and the dreamers. The church of today cannot do without its dreamers. The dream of that first Pentecost was to make know God's desire to enter into the human heart, to fill each of us up with the Spirit. The vision flows from the filling.

The vision was new for the first followers of Jesus, but it is not new for us today. We don't create a new vision each year. We may fine tune it. We may discover new ways to live it out. The first Pentecost and our annual celebrations of that day carry the same message: God is here, wants to "fill us up" that all may know a better way to live. We do well to mark this beginning, but if it is only a remembrance and not a reality, we have missed the invitation, and lost an opportunity.

So on this Pentecost, I want to say something about the present reality, about our dreamers and visionaries, about the hopes and desires of this congregation. I believe the Spirit is filling us.

Filled with the Spirit, we are seeing God at work in the world. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask whether Jesus were the Messiah or not, Jesus sent this message: the

blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and the poor have good news preached to them. Filled with the Spirit, we are participants in this same ministry. Our participation in the Matthew 25 Initiative commits us to address the concerns of the poor and to undo the bonds of racism. The love that we experience among ourselves is a love we are coming to understand as for the world as well.

Filled with the Spirit, we are seeking to deepen the relationships within and beyond our faith community, we are more focused on affirming the gifts of others than on judging their inadequacies. We are trying to welcome rather than exclude. Our circle of concern extends beyond the righteous to include the struggling, the disenfranchised, and the lost. Filled with the Spirit, we practice healing and restoration for human relationships and for the earth.

Filled with the Spirit, we recognize the divine wherever the hungry are fed, the oppressed set free, and the poor have good news preached them; whether the workers share our faith or not. We recognize God in the Jew, the Muslim, the Buddhist, and the spiritual but not religious. We are not interested in limiting God, but in partnering with all those responding to the call and Spirit of God.

Filled with the Spirit, we celebrate the mighty works of God not only in years past and through the saints whom God has called, but in the work that God has called us to today, looking forward to that day when all shall know God, when all people and all creation will live together in harmony.

On Pentecost, we remember the birth of the church and we recognize the birthing of the church today, but we look forward to that day when the Spirit of God fills all. Amen.