

Pentecost People

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Acts 2:1-8

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World:
Gospel Endings

*...we supply
the faith, God
supplies the
power.*

Super Bowl XLV was the most watched TV show in American history, totaling 111 million viewers. Some of you will remember that the Green Bay Packers outlasted the Pittsburgh Steelers 31-25. In truth, many of us watch the Super Bowl as much for the commercials as we do for the game.

According to a variety of polls, the highest rated ad in Super Bowl XLV was “the Force.” The commercial opened with the music of Star Wars playing in the background as a little boy in a Darth Vader costume tries out his magical powers on a variety of objects around the home. He raises his hands toward a dryer in the utility room but nothing happens. He points his hands at the family dog and his sister’s doll, to no avail. Darth’s arms drop to his side in frustration.

His father pulls into the driveway in a new Volkswagen. As his father walks to the house, Darth races to the car and raises his arms. This time the headlights turn on and the engine starts! The startled boy stumbles backward. In the closing sequence, we learn that his father has started the car from the kitchen, using a push button

remote, which is the obvious point of the ad.

The ad playfully illustrates a fundamental Christian principle. Just as the boy couldn’t start the car without the intervention of the father, so we are powerless to do God’s work in the world without the Holy Spirit. While we supply the faith, God supplies the power.

One core doctrine of our Christian faith is the Trinity. We profess belief in one God, known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This doctrine is expressed in the Apostles Creed: “I believe in God the Father almighty...I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord...I believe in the Holy Ghost.” We are more comfortable talking about the God the Father and God the Son, since we have shared experiences of fathers and sons in family life. But we lack any human categories to speak of the Holy Spirit. The King James language of “Holy Ghost” only adds to our confusion. While we understand something of God the Father and Jesus the Son, when it comes to the Spirit, we lock up and glaze over.

The Holy Spirit is poured out on a day called Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit is God's breath.

There are three great festivals in the Old Testament, Pentecost, Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. Passover commemorates God's act of "passing over" Jewish homes during the ten plagues of Egypt. This eight-day festival is observed to coincide with spring planting. Pentecost originates from the Greek word for 50 and occurs 50 days after Passover and celebrates the first fruits of the spring planting. The third great festival, the Feast of Tabernacles, is observed in the fall to correspond with the fall harvest.

Devout Jews of the Diaspora would go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. Jesus' disciples are gathered there, as well. Luke tells us in Acts 1 that Jesus "ordered his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father." Jesus claimed that "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:4-5).

On the day of Pentecost, a mighty wind fills the place where the disciples are huddled, and tongues of fire rest on each of them (2:2-3). These tongues of fire represent the actual languages of those assembled for the festival. These visiting pilgrims are able to hear the mighty acts of God in their own languages.

This multi-sensory event draws quite a crowd. People are astonished to hear the apostles

speaking in their native languages. Peter steps forward to interpret the proceedings. "These men are not drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. They are fulfilling what was spoken through the prophet Joel: "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..." (2:15-17).

The Holy Spirit was bestowed on a few charismatic people in the Old Testament: judges, kings and prophets. But there will come a day when the Spirit will be given indiscriminately to anyone who calls on the Lord—old and young, women and men alike. In this new, prophetic age, everyone gets to be a prophet. Everyone is given a role in proclaiming God's Word.

We read in the book of Genesis that "The Lord God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed (ruah) into his nostrils the breath of life" (2:7). Ruah is the Hebrew word for breath or wind. You can't say this guttural Hebrew word without exerting breath.

The Holy Spirit is God's breath. God breathes His very life and presence into us. We sing in one of our classic hymns, "Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew." This imagery is also reflected in a contemporary worship song

...the Holy Spirit is God's presence living in me.

The Holy Spirit is God's power working through me.

we sing, "This is the air I breathe... Your holy presence living in me."

Christian writer and holocaust survivor Corrie Ten Boom likens our lives to a glove. A glove can't do anything by itself. But if I put my hand in a glove, it can do a lot: writing, sewing and the like. It's not the glove, but my hand in the glove that makes all the difference. We are gloves and the Holy Spirit is the hand.

The very last words Jesus speaks to his disciples in Matthew's gospel consist of a promise: "And remember, I am with you always, even to the close of the age" (28:20). Yet, when we come to the book of Acts, the first thing we're told about Jesus is that he's no longer physically present to his disciples. Although Jesus is absent in body, he is present through the Spirit. Here's the closest I come to a Holy Spirit definition: the Holy Spirit is God's presence living in me.

It has been said the Holy Spirit is the shy member of the Trinity. I don't mean to suggest that the Holy Spirit is shy in the sense of timid. What the Holy Spirit does at Pentecost is anything but timid. The Holy Spirit is shy in the sense that the Spirit does not draw attention to itself. The Holy Spirit draws attention to God the Father and God the Son. The Holy Spirit is God's presence living in me.

We tell our children Jesus lives in their hearts. I wonder

how their little minds process this information. How can one person live inside another person, especially someone separated by 2,000 years, and earth and heaven? Jesus lives in our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's presence living in me.

Jesus went so far as to say we are actually better off with the Holy Spirit than we are with Jesus living among us. "I tell you the truth it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you" (John 16:7).

Jesus, in his earthly body, was limited. He could only be one place at a time. But in his exalted, risen state, by means of the Holy Spirit, he can be everywhere at once.

The Holy Spirit is God's presence living in me. But we can take it a step further. The Holy Spirit is God's power working through me. Jesus said to his disciples in Acts 1, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses..." (1:8). The Greek word for power, *dunamis*, is the root for our English words dynamite and dynamic. The Holy Spirit supplies the energizing force in our witnessing. The Holy Spirit transforms this once timid Peter into a bold witness. Peter's actions at Pentecost contrast sharply with his threefold denial at Jesus' trial.

The seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) features a

***“Am I
ignitable?...
Make me thy
fuel, flame of
God.”***

- Jim Elliot

contemporary rendition of an ancient Celtic cross. Its two horizontal bars depict an open book to represent our commitment of Scripture as the Word of God. The upper portion of the cross is in the shape of a descending dove. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. The flames on either side of the cross represent the tongues of fire at Pentecost.

Maybe you are stagnant in your spiritual life right now. You come to church, but you are only going through the motions. May God as holy wind breathe life into our cold hearts. The prophet Ezekiel comes upon a valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). God commands him to preach to these dry bones, “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live...Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these dead ones, that they may live” (37:5,9). As Ezekiel prophesied to these dry bones, “breath came into them and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (37:10).

Maybe your heart has become cold and unresponsive. May God come as holy fire and burn in us. The prophet Malachi spoke of God’s presence as “a refiner’s fire” (3:2). A refiner’s fire does not destroy indiscriminately like a forest fire. The Spirit purifies and refines. Isaac Watts wrote the hymn “Come, Holy Spirit,

heavenly Dove with all thy quickening powers; kindle a flame of sacred love in these cold hearts of ours.” In the words of the contemporary song “Shine, Jesus, Shine” with the refrain, “Blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire.”

John Calvin’s personal seal and emblem was the image of a flaming heart held in the palm of a hand. The inscription on the seal comes with the words, “My heart I give you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely.”

Jim Elliot was formerly a missionary to the Auca Indians in Ecuador. He was ultimately killed by the very tribe he was seeking to reach. One entry in his diary before his death on Psalm 104 speaks about the fire of God’s love. Elliot asks, “Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread of other things; saturate me with the oil of the spirit so I may be a flame...Make me thy fuel, flame of God.”

John Henry Newman’s prayer written in the 19th century comes to mind:

Come, O Holy Spirit.
Come as Holy Fire and burn
in us,
Come as Holy Wind and
cleanse within,
Come as Holy Light and
lead us in the darkness,
Come as Holy Truth and
dispel our ignorance,
Come as Holy Power and
enable our weakness,
Come as Holy Life and
dwell in us.”

