

Acts 2:1-18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

Sunday, May 19, 2024

## The Breath of God for Everyone

Have you ever had a moment when you had real power?

Some years back, Terely and I enjoyed our usual weekly date night at a North Beach restaurant called Scott Howard. Despite lacking a reservation, we were promptly seated at the best table and treated exceptionally well by the servers, who kept sending us food. I didn't ask questions, I just received it! The general manager approached us: "Hello, we know you own a number of restaurants in the City and we are so honored to have you with us tonight." I said: Thank you. I didn't lie! I didn't say yes, or no. Just "thank you". And just continued to be treated like royalty.

The power felt sooooo goood. I had status, I had attention, I had good food, and it all spelled power. And I wanted more of it.

Power is a powerful drug. It keeps politicians in office too long, CEOs overstaying their welcome, parents over functioning with their kids. And it begs the question: Is it possible to acquire power and NOT end up hoarding it, or using it for greed, excess, and control? Is there such a thing as power filling you that doesn't exhaust you or ruin you, but actually makes you a better human being? That convinces you of God's love for you in a profound way? The answer that Pentecost gives us is "YES,"

I love Pentecost. I've never spoken in tongues but it would sure be cool. I love how when God's spirit comes down on you, it makes people think you are drunk. And the defense: "It's only 9 a.m.!" Making me think I should title the sermon "It's 9 am somewhere!"

What is Pentecost? There was already a Pentecost. Verse 1 tells us they gathered "on the day" of Pentecost. Before the Pentecost we celebrate today, ancient Israel gathered 50 days after harvest for a feast, which also commemorated God giving Moses the law at Mt. Sinai, accompanied by wind, fire, and trembling mountains symbolizing the presence of God. Today's Pentecost mirrors this, but with even greater power and intimacy.

In this Pentecost, the Holy Spirit of God comes to fill – It's not God ahead or behind or about or beside you – but God in you. In other words, every person in this place was the mountain! Every person became a place to meet God! You are the temple of God, you are "living stones." Moses would say: "The thing I couldn't get near or it would kill me, can actually come into you! You carry around in you the very presence of God!"

Now if Pentecost is true, if the Spirit of God is actually present in you, what difference might it make?

### **A New Hope.**

If Pentecost is true, I can be sure God is for me, and not against me, or worse, indifferent to me.

If you believe God is indifferent to you, everything will then be up to you and you will live in a sort of dry deism. There may be lots of religiosity, but no active trust or divine awareness.

If you believe God is against you, God becomes the nagging critic, and you never feel as if you have done enough to be in God's favor.

And in both cases, it will come out as anxiety, because anxiety reveals our real belief system. I'm not talking about anxiety as a diagnosed condition. But rather the "worrying about many things" kind of anxiety, to use Jesus' phrase, because if God isn't on your side you've got to fix and control your world! You will use religion to do it. I've known many Christians who think God is against them.

But Pentecost declares this: God is for you more than you are even for yourself! All you can do is be open to that. The One who created you cares like a parent for a child. We are cared for simply because we are beloved children. Which means Pentecost is an invitation to a relationship with God based on love and trust. How might that change the way you think of your life? That God is for you?

No matter what has happened, no matter what you have been through, God is for you and you can't change God's mind about you. Pentecost is an invitation to change our mind about God.

### **A New Community.**

What language is the first worship service in? All of them. You know what we would have done if Pentecost was in our preferred language? "Well, my language is the language of heaven." I remember the first time I went to a Spanish speaking worship service. I was dating my now wife, Terely, who is from Cuba. The pastor came up to me after the service and asked me in English if I had learned the "language of heaven yet." I thought about it and said "Spanish?" The good news is that Pentecost was in all languages because Pentecost is for all people.

In 1492, several monumental events occurred, one seemingly minor but historically significant: Antonio de Nebrija presented Queen Isabel of Spain with the first book of grammar. He called it the key to their dreams of a Spanish Empire, a powerful weapon made not of steel or gunpowder, but paper. When Queen Isabel remarked she had no need for such a book, Antonio famously replied, "But Your Highness, language is the greatest tool of empire."

To see that he was right, look at the 21 Spanish-speaking countries today, over 500 years later. Consider Germany's language laws in the 1930s and 40s, South Africa's from the mid-40s to the mid-90s, and the English-only legislation in 28 U.S. states. Few markers of identity are as potent as language.

It's important to remember that this list of countries gathered for Pentecost are not free people. These are all colonized people groups. The empire might have killed Jesus, but the struggle continued. And, on this day, three thousand rose up in his place. Where Rome had one rebellious Jew, they now had thousands.

Though they likely spoke Greek, the language of the Empire, the Spirit chose not to use the language of imperialism and dominance. Instead, the Holy Spirit revealed God's truth in many tongues—Medeish, Parthianese, and wherever a language exists highlighting how God reaches us through whatever means and language necessary. God will not be limited to one language just as God is not limited to one people group.

At Pentecost we have a foretaste of God's promise that every tribe, tongue, and nation are part of God's plan for the world. The Holy Spirit poured out on all flesh!

Not just on those with power – but the powerless  
Not just on men, but on women as well.  
Not just on the free, but on the slaves as well.  
All are in ONE in Jesus, that's what Pentecost is telling us.

Which means Pentecost is an invitation for this church to reflect that unity and work hard to keep that unity, and see how it impacts the world around us because Jesus said that the world will believe when we are one. It's what David Bosch calls "the sociological impossibility of the gospel." The Spirit gathers together people who otherwise wouldn't be together, and the watching world takes note.

### **A New Story.**

I believe that all of us are living off a story of some kind to drive our lives. Pentecost tells a story. The story about God-with-us, God becoming human and healing the sick and feeding the hungry and being killed for it all and then defeating death itself, Pentecost is God's way of saying "build your life on this story, it's the one that will be large enough for the greatness of your soul and the complexity of this world.

Because God is still writing, still loving us and all that is into redemption. There's always more in this story. After the cross's humiliation and suffering, there was more. After Jesus was laid in the tomb, there was more. After Pentecost, with flames and new languages, there was more. Which means in our suffering, there is always more — more when life feels hopeless, more when our plans fail, and more when we feel powerless. Our hope isn't based on our power, the Dow Jones, our "perfect" life, or our righteousness, but on the God of the empty tomb. The story of birth, death, resurrection, ascension, and the Spirit continues to unfold.

What story have you built your life on? Every day all sorts of stories are pushed on us. Stories of accumulation, materialism, consumerism, militarism, racism – there a million stories to build out life on and Pentecost is God's massive shout "This is the story you can build your life on".

Our health, relationships, and wealth, even the good things, don't last — nor do sorrow and suffering. What endures is what the Holy Spirit revealed 2,000 years ago and continues to reveal today: Our hope doesn't rest in our current circumstances but in the eternal, unending love of God. From ashes to ashes, dust to dust, first breath to last and beyond.

This is the hope, community, and story of Pentecost. Amen.