

JOHN 15:26-27; 16:4b-16 (p. 876)

MAY 23, 2021

ACTS 2:1-21 (p. 883)

BLAINE

PENTECOST

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Quicken our hearts with your Holy Spirit Lord. Open our eyes and ears to your Truth.

Settle the turmoil that ever-clamors for our attention. And please, center us now on what you have to say. Then send us forth, Lord, as witnesses to that Truth, filled with your Power and your Presence, and guided by your Hand. We ask these things in Jesus Name, Amen!

“EMPOWERED”

It’s been seven weeks since Easter! Eight weeks since the beginning of Holy Week!

Remember Palm Sunday? Remember the Passover Meal, what we call Maundy Thursday where Jesus gave us a new “mandate”, to love one another? Remember Good Friday, the darkness of the Crucifixion, and the absolute joy of the Empty Tomb?

Think back to all the changes in the last seven or eight weeks! For you, and for our world! All that has happened, all that’s going on now, all that will take place in the days ahead! Now try to picture what it was like for the Disciples, as the Early Church attempted to discern “what’s next”! The loss! The fear! The Unknown! The accumulated stress! Think about the time and the energy helping those around you cope with the very same things! We might have a better “glimpse” this year, than in previous years, but even if not, to say that is has been “a rough couple of months” would be an understatement! And our Readings this morning, sit like bookends on that!

The Disciples have moved from sharing the Passover, the Last Supper with our Lord in the Upper Room, to hiding out in that same Upper Room! And then, moving into the streets of Jerusalem, sharing the Good News! That's quite a journey, don't you think? The Believers have gone from Jesus predicting His arrest, trial, and execution—through the actual fulfillment of that nightmare—then on to that Glorious Easter Morning! Only then, to hiding away! Emotionally, they have traveled from confusion and the unknown, surrounded by sadness—to confusion and the unknown, surrounded by joy! And then, to confusion and the unknown, surrounded by fear! All in just a couple of months! And now we find them confronted by a mocking crowd, yet boldly sharing the Gospel!

I honestly don't think we can comprehend what that was like, do you! Although with all the COVID stuff, the civil unrest, the hate and divisions right now, we might have a taste! But the Disciples have lost their Rabbi too, their Teacher, their Pastor and Spiritual Director. They've lost their friend, the leader of this three-year Mission Trip they have been on, the Mission that each one of them has given up their livelihood to pursue! For them, everything has suddenly come to an abrupt end! Think back a year and a half, to March of 2020, when everything stopped for much of the world! Jesus, who they hailed as Messiah, has been nailed to a Roman Cross! And with Him, all of their hopes and dreams were nailed as well!

Only that's not really the case, is it? Hence the confusion and the unknown! The Risen Lord has met with all of them, personally! It happened on several different occasions, over a period of several weeks! It has been quite the emotional rollercoaster!

And the Church, the fledgling Church, has had its ups and downs as well! When Jesus turned the water into wine at that Wedding in Cana, John says, “a lot of people put their faith in Him”. And when Jesus was up north, with that Samaritan woman at the Well, Scripture records that “many from the town believed in Him”.

The Church has grown considerably! They’ve added Seekers and the Curious! Five thousand were fed on a hillside, one afternoon, remember, with just a few loaves of bread and couple of fish! And then, shortly after that, another four thousand experienced the exact same thing over in Gentile territory, with people who weren’t even raised in the Faith! Those numbers were just the men, too. Imagine how many women and children were there!

When Jesus walked on the water, people were really impressed. Folks started to follow Him all over the countryside. When He called forth Lazarus, out of the grave, people got in line behind His cause! And by the time Jesus rode into the Capital on the back of that donkey, the crowds had formed a Big City Parade, like some kind of Triumphal Entry into town! Magnitudes lined the streets, waving Palm Fronds and shouting Hosannas with such joy! The growth of this Jesus Movement, has skyrocketed!

Only now, fifty days later, less than two months after the Resurrection—by the Jewish Festival of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, what the Greeks call Pentecost—on the day when the faithful celebrate the Law being given to them through Moses, on Mt. Sinai—that throng of Believers has dwindled down considerably!

They only number about one hundred and twenty now. Less people than worship here at Blaine on an average, Pre-COVID Sunday. Slightly more than we are averaging now. It has definitely been a tumultuous, couple of months!

Only now, in the Second Chapter of Acts, we see the Church start to swell again! Verse 41 tells us that “three thousand people” accepted Jesus as Lord on the day of Pentecost! And verse 47 says that as they “continued to meet together, the Lord added to their number daily”! What does that say? “As they continued to meet together...”! And the rest of the Book of Acts, details how the Gospel spread to the entire known world, just as promised! It’s amazing really!

So, what happened? What is it that caused this rapid expansion? How did the Church go from a thriving, growing Community of Faith, down to just a small band? And then, turn it around again? How do we do that now? The growing part! First, there were thousands, right, or maybe even tens of thousands, sitting at the feet of the Master, listening to His every word! And that was the case right up to the point when the teaching got hard, when personal sacrifice was required! Then many drifted away! But now, for some reason, people are actually making those sacrifices, aren’t they! And taking the Lord’s teachings to heart! It’s as if the Church has started to Breathe again, has gotten a “Second Wind”! How in the world did that happen?

Well let me give you a hint. The Greek phrase translated “Holy Spirit”, is “Agio Pnevma”. “Agio” means “Sacred” or “Holy”. And “Pnevma” means “Breath” or “Wind”. It’s the same root as in the word pneumatic, as in pneumatic tire or drill. It’s the same root in the word pneumonia! The Hebrew phrase is “Ruach ha-Kodesh”, Spirit of Holiness! I like that! It’s the “Ruach Elohim”, the Breath of God, that hovered over the waters of Creation in Genesis! So, the Church has definitely gotten a second wind! The Spirit of Holiness! The Breath of God now resides within them!

I want you to try an experiment. It’s my favorite Pentecost experiment, so humor me for a moment. Wait until I tell you, but in just a moment I am going to ask you to breath out all of the air in your lungs. When I say, empty out as much as you possibly can. Then, before you take in another breath, I am going to ask you to do something. Are you ready?
...Okay! ...Blow out all of your air. ...All of it. ...Hold it! ...Now before you breathe back in, Scream! ...You can’t do it, can you! At least not much more than a squeak! It’s physically impossible! Without breath, without air, without wind rolling over your vocal cords, you simply can’t make a sound! You can’t speak without breath! It’s impossible! And you can’t speak for God, without the Breath of God within you!

The Church, by design then, is a Pnuematological Phenomenon! We are a Spirit-Filled, Spirit-Empowered Creation! Remember last week, talking about how the Church was prayed into existence by Jesus on the night He was betrayed? We were “birthed” with that prayer! Well on Pentecost, the Church was “spanked” by the Holy Spirit, and started breathing that life-giving “Breath of God”!

Like at the Creation of Adam, in Genesis 2:7, God breathes life into us! Like Ezekiel predicted, in chapter 37, Dry Bones come together and are given life by the Breath of God! I love the imagery, don't you! I love the Prophecy! It's amazing!

Notice, if you will, what Peter says in his speech today. He is quoting the Prophet Joel. And Joel, speaking eight hundred and fifty years earlier, tells us exactly what will happen when the Lord pours out His Spirit. "Your sons and daughters will prophesy". "Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. Men and women, servant and free, will Prophesy. And wonders will be seen in Heaven and on the earth!"

The first "Pentecost" happened seven weeks and one day after God's People were freed from bondage in Egypt, following the Passover. Fifty days into the Exodus, the Israelites gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and received from Moses, the Law of God! Now, fifty days after God's People are freed from the bondage of Sin, the Spirit of God is poured out upon their hearts!

Jeremiah predicted this over six hundred years earlier! Chapter 31, verses 31-34 says, "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a New Covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the Covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my Covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord."

“This is the Covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord’, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more!” I love Prophecy! It clearly demonstrates that God has a plan! What was predicted then, is exactly what happened now! I absolutely love Prophecy!

William Willimon though, points out that “often, when Conservative Christians speak of Prophecy, they do so as ‘predicting the future’. Whereas Liberal Christians often speak of Prophecy as ‘social critique’, making political statements. But Biblical ‘Prophecy’”, he says, “is always ‘to speak forth the Word of God’, to ‘declare His mighty works’, ‘to make God known in the world’”! And that, by-the-way, requires the Breath of God!

We need the Holy Spirit of God, in order to witness to the Truth, don’t we! In fact, we need the Holy Spirit of God in us, in order to even understand the Truth! Notice that those not filled with the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost were “amazed and perplexed”, whereas those who received the Word, “repented and were baptized”! If we are not connected, not plugged into the Word of God, we aren’t going to get it! And it’s the Holy Spirit, that Heavenly, universal, connection, that allows this to happen! Which, when you think about it, is exactly what Jesus was saying with the Vine and the Branches lesson, isn’t it! Without the Holy Spirit, it just doesn’t work!

There is a story of a Sunday School Class learning the Apostle's Creed. Each child was given one line to memorize and read out loud. One Sunday, the Pastor stopped by for a visit, and asked if he could hear them recite it. They began, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth." "I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord." Everything was going great, when suddenly, there was an awkward pause. "You are doing fine," said the Pastor! "What's wrong?" Slowly, a timid little girl raised her hand. "Pastor," she said, "the boy who believes in the Holy Spirit isn't here today".

...Without the Holy Spirit, there will be an awkward pause in our Witness!

So, here is the question. Is the one who believes in the Holy Spirit here today? Are we truly "connected", really tuned-in? Because "how we listen", and "how we look at things", has a lot to do with what we will see and hear!

Remember that Viral Internet Sensation five or six years ago? The one with the "Gold Dress" versus the "Blue Dress"? If not, Google it when you get home. There was a picture of a dress that some people clearly saw as White and Gold, whereas others saw as Blue and Black! It may have been the very start of all the divisions in this Country! Who knows! Scientists said it all came down to individual human perception about the surrounding, ambient light! What each of us saw as "normal", made the dress appear either one way or the other!

Or how about all the “Auditory Arguments” a few years after that, again on the Internet, where people either heard the word “Yanny” or the word “Laurel”? Do you remember? Most people could not even fathom how someone could hear it differently! It was another great Social Commentary on all the divisions in our world today! The whole thing was based on “frequency” of course, and “where” the listener was, both physically as well as physiologically! Again, if you don’t know what I am talking about, Google it!

My point is, for a “receiver” of any kind to correctly pick-up the proper signal, and translate it accurately, that “receiver” has to be set to the right frequency! We need to make sure that there is no “distortion” as well! So, are you in-tune with Holy Spirit? What a great question! Is His Voice coming through loud and clear?

Picture what that was like! “The sound of a violent wind!” “Tongues of Fire that reached out and touched every Believer!” “All of them speaking in strange tongues, tongues that enable those from far away to understand what they were saying, to understand the Good News!” Imagine, “Believers, speaking in ways that non-believers could hear!” Which I think is the entire point, and certainly bears repeating! “Believers, speaking in ways that non-believers can hear, and understand!”

How does “that Truth” speak to us today? Better yet, how do we speak “that Truth” today? In what ways do we need to change our speech patterns, our dialect, our tone, so that Seekers might hear? What language do we normally speak, and is that a language that others can comprehend?

Churches talk quite a bit about losing a generation, or maybe more! But have we ever stopped to consider how we come across to them? Does our music speak to the hearts of the uninitiated? Or only to our hearts, or to those of our parents? Do our Church Structures, our Verbiage, our Rituals, only communicate to those in the know? Are we even trying to make translations, or allowing the Holy Spirit to make translations? What a great question to constantly ask ourselves, and constantly answer!

Oh, I know it's not easy to speak in a foreign tongue! I took French in High School! It probably wasn't easy for the Disciples in Jerusalem either! I can't imagine it even happening, if it weren't for the Holy Spirit! But if you want someone to hear what you are saying, if you want those outside of the Faith to receive the Good News—Parthians and Medes and Elamites, Phrygians and Pamphylans—if you want them to hear the Wonders of God proclaimed, then don't you have to speak to them in their own tongue?

Today is the Official Birthday of the Church! Born with a prayer by our Lord to our Heavenly Father! And then spanked into breathing by the Holy Spirit! How is that for Trinitarian Theology! Today, we celebrate being plugged into, tuning-in to, the Promised Comforter, the One that Jesus mentioned in His Farewell Address in the Upper Room!

There are so many images for the Spirit in Scripture! Mostly, because we simply cannot comprehend the magnitude of God! We have a Comforter, a Teacher, an Advocate, a Counselor, a Helper, the Spirit of Truth! In Greek, it's Paraclete. A Legal Advisor, a Battle Partner, someone who has your back!

It's God's own Spirit, the Breath of God, the "Ruach Elohim" filling up your lungs, poured into your heart! A Spirit whose sole mission is to point to Jesus Christ, our Lord! And by-the-way, that's a key way to discerning the Spirit! Is what I am doing pointing to Jesus? Does what we do together point to Jesus? Because if not, then no matter how dramatic it might be, or even appear, it is not from God!

That Promised Gift descended on Jesus like a Dove at His Baptism, remember? But it came with a Violent Roar at Pentecost, and in Tongues of Raging Fire! So, I can't tell you if it will come to you gently, like a Dove, or if it will Rock your World! That may change from time-to-time, and vary by the situation! I don't know if the "fruits" of the Spirit, for you, will include those listed in Galatians either, like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Or if the "fruits" will make us stand up in the streets and shout down the crowds, boldly proclaiming the Good News!

What I do know is, in John 14, Jesus promised that if we love Him and keep His commands, He will ask the Father, and the Father will give us this Spirit of Truth, to be with us forever! That's a given! A Promise from our Lord! What we do with it, however, well, that's in our court!

Jack London, a renowned American Novelist once wrote, "I'd rather be ashes than dust. I'd rather my spark go out in a burning flame than it be stifled with dry rot. I'd rather be a splendid meteor blazing across the sky, every atom in me a magnificent glow, than to be a sleepy and permanent planet."

He went on. “Life is to be lived, not just to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I will use my time!” And you know, as I get older and more reflective, I’d say I have to agree!

I would rather be ashes than dust! We need the Fire, don’t we! And Fire, remember, produces both “Heat” and “Light”! We need both, of course! But sometimes, we need one more than the other! So, stop and ask yourself if there are any parts of your world that need illumination right now! Or if maybe, there is any dry underbrush that needs to be burned away! Are there things in your life that should have a slow, prescribed burn right now? Or things, maybe, that should immediately be set ablaze in a wildfire?

Are there places that need warming from God’s Tongues of Fire? Or lazy attitudes that need to be ignited? Do you simply need the Breath of God filling your lungs, the “Ruach Elohim”—the Spirit of Holiness, the “Ruach ha-Kodesh”—washing over you, flooding every dry corner of your world? Because it’s here, you know! Available to each and all! That’s a Promise from Jesus Himself! So, tune in! Be still! Ask, and you shall receive! And then, step up, and step out! And all of God’s People said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Give us your Presence Lord, as we humbly bow in prayer. Stir up your Spirit within us, empowering us with gifts from above. Come to us in power Lord! Baptize us anew, with your life-giving breath! Pour out your truth and loosen our tongues to speak that truth, boldly in your Name! Bless us Lord, please, through the gifts of your Holy Spirit, so that we may be a blessing to others.

Lord, you know us even better than we know ourselves. So, search us now and bring to our minds any faults or sins that we need to confess and ask forgiveness for. Cleanse us by your grace Lord. And assure us of your pardon. Fill us with your Peace, and with it, your Power. Comfort our afflictions Lord. And afflict us where we are way too comfortable. And use us mightily to spread the Good News!

Father, as dearly loved and redeemed children we come before you this morning. And therefore, in confidence, we bring our fears and trepidations, our sorrows and our grief, our joys and celebrations before your Altar of Grace. And we especially Lord, place before you

You are the Gift of Life Lord, so that is what we ask for today on the birthday of your church, Life! We ask you to enliven us, to awake us from our slumber, to rock our world, and crush our idols, to send us out into the world boldly proclaiming the truth! We ask for the manifold gifts of your Spirit, so that we will glorify you in all that we say and do!

Grant us you, Father, please, as we pray together now the very prayer that your Son Jesus taught us saying, Our Father...