

“A Promise Fulfilled”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Pentecost – June 8, 2014

Acts 2: 1-21

It was quiet. They were sitting together in one place. It had been 50 days since Jesus has been raised from the dead. It had been only a few days since Jesus had ascended into heaven. These followers of Jesus were waiting, waiting for something to happen.

And then came the wind.

Last summer, our family visited Scotland during our time of renewal. One of the special places we went was the Isle of Skye, off the western coast of the country. On our drive around the island, we drove up to the top of one of the overlooks, and the wind was absolutely howling. It was hard to stand up, it . . . you know, instead of telling you, let me show you. (play video clip)

I don't know if that is what the day of Pentecost was like in that room of disciples, but it certainly was a disturbing experience for those men and women. William Willimon writes: *Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, says that on the day of Pentecost, Jews from every nation were gathered in one place. They must have had trouble understanding one another because, even though they all shared the same faith, they were separated by different languages.*

The Spirit descends, people begin to talk, people begin to hear, people in that room said, “How is it possible that I am able to hear and to understand you, even though I speak a different language?” It was a miracle (Pulpit Resource, April-June 2002, 30).

The wind of God blew through that place, and the people heard one another speaking the Gospel. Medes and Parthians, Egyptians and Elamites, all sorts of people of different races, ethnicity, and wealth. And even though they were united by a faith – the Jewish faith – they could not understand what each other was saying before Pentecost. Now, through God's power, that changed. And it changed the world.

Sometimes it feels as if we are Medes and Parthians, Egyptians and Elamites, people who are united by one language or one faith yet are unable to hear what the other is saying. Instead of seeing someone for who they really are, we do not hear their words because of their skin color, their income, or their age or gender. We may all be United States citizens, but we feel far from united when it comes to politics or social justice issues or the government's role in our lives.

Such division among a people also happens in the church. Someone offers a new idea, and instead of hearing it on its merits, we ignore or reject it based on who it is coming from. We allow our individual interests to outweigh the consensus of the whole, as fighting and bickering can ensue.

As Lisa leaves at the end of this week to be a commissioner to the General Assembly in Detroit, I'm sure that gathering might feel like a bunch of Medes and Elamites. As the church, we have a wide variety of opinions about so many issues – ordination, marriage, peacemaking, visioning and mission. As someone who attended General Assembly six years ago, it can feel as if we do not hear or understand one another, even though we are speaking the same language. How do we overcome these obstacles of division when we yearn for unity in the Spirit?

First, it begins with recognizing that this day is the fulfillment of a promise made by our Lord. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (14:26). And just last week, we heard Jesus say, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The day of Pentecost is not a random event. It is a day foreordained by God. It was promised by Jesus, and now that promise has been fulfilled.

In response to that fulfilled promise, I believe we must allow the Spirit to work around, in, and through us. The day of Pentecost is a day to celebrate the coming of God's Spirit as our strength and guide to do what we do, as individuals, as a people, as the church. To be a Christian not only means to believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, but also that you are full of God's Spirit. That Spirit opens our ears, widens our hearts, illumines our minds, and breaks down the barriers society has built which divide God's people. To be full of the Spirit means to see God working in our midst, and believing that with God, all things are indeed possible.

We as a congregation are seeking to walk in the Spirit, and as individuals we are seeking to share the Spirit with the world. That, in essence, is what evangelism is. Not the practice of beating people over the head with the Bible, but making them interested and excited about the Gospel through our daily living. A former president of Emory University shares what this might look like through one encounter he had.

(The university president) got on a plane and nodded to the man who sat in the seat next to him. He appeared to be a businessman, perhaps returning home for the weekend after a long business trip. No sooner had the plane taken off than he noticed that the man pulled out a large Bible and a pen and notebook.

"Oh, no," the university president thought to himself. "Here I've got a two-hour flight and I am seated next to a religious fanatic." And so he became absorbed in his work, turning his eyes away from the man, knowing that if he engaged in conversation, he could be trapped there for the rest of the flight with this religious fanatic trying to convert him.

But the man was fully absorbed in his Bible study – reading, taking notes. The university president looked at the man out of the corner of his eye. He certainly appeared to be a normal person. He started wondering why the man was so intently reading the Bible. He glanced at him a couple of times, but the man never looked up.

Finally, the university president said, "I notice that you are studying the Bible."

The man said, "Yes, I am."

Then that was all. The president spoke again, "I'm a Methodist minister myself."

"Really?" said the man not all that interested.

"Yes, I notice you are reading the Bible."

"Yes," the man replied tersely.

"I was wondering why you are reading the Bible?" said the president.

"You have a problem with that?" the man asked.

"No, no problem," he said.

"I'm preparing my Sunday school lesson," said the man.

"Really?" the university president said.

"Well, good talking with you. I've got a tough lesson to present tomorrow, we are studying 1 Kings," said the man.

The university president writes: "That's evangelism! If we could just go on about our business, being Christian in the best way we know how, we will make evangelism worthy of the name." We ought to live in such a way, going about our Christian business, so that the world is made curious. The world will ask, and then we can tell (Willimon, 32).

We honor the promise fulfilled today on Pentecost when we, going about our Christian business, make the world curious and spark new flames of the gospel in our daily walk of faith.

It happens when a group of men take time out of their weekends and spend a Saturday morning demolishing a home in Haughville. Through Hearts and Hands of Indianapolis, that home will become a safe, affordable, clean house for a deserving family. The curiosity of neighbors is stirred when they see this work taking place. And, Just Us Guys, that curiosity would be stirred further if we each invited someone new to join us for our next work project!

It happens when we are present with church members in times of worry or anxiety – in a hospital waiting room, on the phone, in a funeral home, sharing a meal or a cup of coffee. When neighbors or strangers witness the presence of so many in times of need, their curiosity is piqued, and they wonder who these people are and what they are about.

Pentecost is a promise fulfilled. That promise is not to be celebrated only one day a year. It is meant to be celebrated every day of our lives of discipleship. For when we live each day believing that God can do anything through us by the power of the Holy Spirit, then we are inspired to do our business in the world, so that others might know the power of God's love.

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit – and performed works as the Spirit gave them ability."

Thanks be to God. Amen.