

“Pentecost Promise Fulfilled”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Pentecost – May 31, 2020

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.

Have you ever been in the midst of a storm with strong winds? It can be pretty unnerving. Maybe you're driving on the interstate, and your car or van keeps getting buffeted by the winds, and it's hard to stay in your lane. Here in Central Indiana, we are trained to go to the basement or interior rooms of buildings when we hear the tornado sirens and the approaching violent winds. Our family visited the Isle of Skye in Scotland seven years ago while I was on sabbatical, and the winds at the top of one mountain made it almost impossible to stand up straight.

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).

I am grateful to those in our church today who in a small way have embodied the Day of Pentecost in the scripture reading from Acts. As Amy, Milly, Heather, Samantha, Debbie, Willy, Esther and I read this story, it was our reminder that the Spirit moves in the lives of so many people today. As we heard English, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, and Twi, it's not unlike how the wind of God blew through that place more than two thousand years ago, 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. 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, social justice, or the government's role in our lives.

If we ever needed a more telling example of that fact, we have witnessed it this week in Minneapolis and our country. White police officers forcibly subduing a black man to the point that he eventually died. Protests which have led to widespread destruction of property and even further loss of life. Anger, frustration, sadness, hatred. We have become a nation of Medes and Elamites who are unable to sit down and listen to one another, who have forgotten how our differences are our strength, and who would rather stay in our own camps of familiar tongues rather than be open to the Spirit's power and movement in our collective lives.

And before we stand in righteous judgment and claim that the church is impervious to such division, let's check our egos at the door for one minute. 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. We label the other as too liberal or too conservative, refusing to see him or her as God sees him or her: a beloved child of the Creator. It can happen in the local congregation, and it can certainly happen in the larger church. We are just as susceptible as the outside world to building up walls that block the Spirit's movement.

Pentecost is not only a day of celebrating the arrival of God's Spirit. It is also a day to recognize the hard work that the Spirit calls us to as Christ's disciples. 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.

But it's an experience that causes confusion, bewilderment, and uncertainty. Not unlike what we are living through, the people didn't understand what was happening, and there was much anxiety as they heard all of these different languages being spoken by the apostles. But the Spirit doesn't leave the people in a state of confusion. The Spirit

leads people to understand more clearly who Jesus Christ is for their lives of faith.

And Peter offers clarification and direction for the crowd's bewilderment. This isn't some random event. This is a day that was foretold by the prophet Joel. This is a day that fulfills God's promise "to pour out my Spirit on all flesh." This is a day that will empower men and women, young and old, slave and free – all those who call on the name of the Lord – to dream dreams and see visions. This is a day when "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (2:21).

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.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has as one of its four special offerings each year the Pentecost Offering. Our national church has designated this offering through the years to focus on the younger and youngest generation of believers in our midst. On a national level, these offerings go to support national youth gatherings, like the Presbyterian Youth Triennium every three years at Purdue University, an experience that multiple youth from John Knox have enjoyed over the last four years. Another way this offering is used is to support the Young Adult Volunteer Program, something that Lisa's daughter, Bethany, experienced after graduating from Hanover College. In fact, Bethany's experience with the YAV Program ultimately led her to the career she is now serving in as a social worker for at-risk families and children.

The national church encourages local congregations to keep 40% of what is collected to use for children and youth ministries in their own context. And we have sent countless children from John Knox to Camp Pyoca the last several summers with our portion of the Pentecost Offering. This year, we will be sending our portion directly to Pyoca, so they might be able to weather this summer without a camping program and be able to provide summer camp experiences for children and youth in the future.

These are just some of the ways that our church seeks to honor the promise fulfilled on Pentecost – there are many, many more. But they all have in common the hope and promise of our children, youth, and young adults. As we continue to witness and struggle with so much racial unrest in our country, I believe now, more than ever, we need to look to these beloved children of God for hope in the Spirit.

When our family moved here seventeen years ago, we were given a great deal of advice and counsel about where we should live, especially as it related to the best schools for our daughters, Erin and Heather. Debbie and I made the conscious, intentional choice to live within the bounds of I-465. We found a home in Pike Township, and we have felt blessed that our girls grew up in schools and a community that was diverse, not only racially, but also economically and culturally. It has influenced our daughters' view of the world, how there are great inadequacies which need to be eradicated, and how our differences are not to be demonized, but instead are to be celebrated. These were not the experiences of mine or Debbie's upbringing, simply due to the towns or cities that we grew up in. But we made an intentional choice in our parenting of our girls to have a different experience than our own.

My hope is that they, along with so many others in their generation, will be able to lead our country into a new day. That day will be marked by the Spirit's promise to hear one another honestly and openly, without judgment or prejudice, so that we honor one another as beloved children of God. That day will be marked by the Spirit's promise to work in remarkable ways to tear down the walls that divide us, and we will witness people of all skin colors and ethnicities and income levels working together for the common good. That day will be marked by the Spirit's promise to be poured out on all flesh, so that all shall prophesy of God's coming kingdom, and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

We have a lot of hard work ahead of us – as a church and as a country. This day is our reminder that God gives us the strength, the power, the fortitude to face that hard work together. May our hope be in God's Holy Spirit, which might move in the lives of all of God's people to bring about a new day of peace, justice, and healing for this land.

Thanks be to God. Amen.