

## Scripture Reading for Sunday May 31 2020 (Pentecost)

### Acts 2:1-21 New Testament for Everyone (NTE)

2 When the day of Pentecost had finally arrived, they were all together in the same place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly there came from heaven a noise like the sound of a strong, blowing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Then tongues, seemingly made of fire, appeared to them, moving apart and coming to rest on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the words to say.

<sup>5</sup> There were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem at that time. <sup>6</sup> When they heard this noise they came together in a crowd. They were deeply puzzled, because every single one of them could hear them speaking in his or her own native language. <sup>7</sup> They were astonished and amazed. 'These men who are doing the speaking are all Galileans, aren't they?' they said. <sup>8</sup> 'So how is it that each of us can hear them in our own mother tongues?' <sup>9</sup> There are Parthians here, and Medians, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judaea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya that belong to Cyrene; there are people from Rome, <sup>11</sup> proselytes as well as Jews; there are Cretans and Arabs. We can hear them telling us about the powerful things God has done – *in our own languages!* <sup>12</sup> Everyone was astonished and perplexed. 'What does it all mean?' they were asking each other. <sup>13</sup> But some sneered. 'They're full of new wine!' they said.

<sup>14</sup> Then Peter got up, with the eleven. He spoke to them in a loud voice. 'People of Judaea!' he began. 'All of you staying here in Jerusalem! There's something you have to know! Listen to what I'm saying!

<sup>15</sup> These people aren't drunk, as you imagine. It's only nine o'clock in the morning! <sup>16</sup> No, this is what the prophet Joel was talking about, when he said,

<sup>17</sup> In the last days, declares God, I will pour out my spirit on all people.

Your sons and your daughters will prophesy;

your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams;

<sup>18</sup> yes, even on slaves, men and women alike,

will I pour out my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> And I will give signs in the heavens above, and portents on earth beneath,  
blood and fire and clouds of smoke.

<sup>20</sup> The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood,  
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup> And then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

## Sermon: God's Spirit is Given Lavishly to His People!

In Acts chapter 2 we read of a dramatic, public encounter with God; Luke writes: "A sound like a violent *wind* blowing came *from heaven* and filled the entire house where Christ's followers were sitting. And tongues spreading out like a fire appeared to them and came to rest on each one of them."<sup>1</sup> Clearly something very special is going on, not least because "the wind," which signifies God's Spirit<sup>2</sup> coming *from heaven*, is not only the complement of Jesus earlier *ascending to heaven*,<sup>3</sup> but reveals that *God* is the undeniable *originator* of what happened. Although this is truly a pivotal event in history, this needs to be appreciated in the broader context concerning the spirit of God's presence in the world.

In Genesis 1 we are told that the spirit of God was brooding over the face of the emerging cosmos.<sup>4</sup> That same creative spirit - the Hebrew word denotes "breath" or "wind" - not only breathed life into Adam, but progressively began to make Godself known to human beings.<sup>5</sup> The spirit of God was later thought to be present in particular people in Old Testament, such as prophets or kings. But that presence was not continual and could be withdrawn if the individual involved persisted in disobeying God. By the end of the Old Testament, after the last of the prophets, the divine Spirit was not in evidence in Israel at all.<sup>6</sup> More than that, Ezekiel had a vision of the "glory" of God departing from Solomon's Temple<sup>7</sup> and there is no corresponding sign of God's glory - or *presence* - returning to the Temple, once it had been rebuilt following the Babylonian exile.<sup>8</sup> However prophets, such as Joel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, were clear that in the end time the Spirit of the LORD would come again and would be widely disseminated. For example, God proclaimed through the prophet Ezekiel: "I will give you a *new heart* and put a *new spirit* in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."<sup>9</sup> This portrays the Holy Spirit, the divine guiding presence, as residing *within* people, *God's* people - and *not just* special people - and being enabled to live in God's ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:2-3 (NET Bible).

<sup>2</sup> Made explicit in Acts 2:4. The technical word for this is "theophany," like whirlwinds and fire in the Old Testament (see 1 Kings 19:11-13; 2 Kings 2,1,11; Ezek 1:4), they were dramatic signs of God *intense* presence (sometimes in judgement: Isa 66:15; Jer 4:13).

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:1-11. See also: <https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/He-Ascended-into-Heaven.pdf> .

<sup>4</sup> Gen 1:2.

<sup>5</sup> The *personhood* of the spirit of God is not prominent in the OT, but emerges in NT and most clearly in the post-biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

<sup>6</sup> This is why the coming of (the prophet) John the Baptist is so significant; Luke 1:12-17; 3:1-20; 20:1-8.

<sup>7</sup> See Ezek 10 - especially v18.

<sup>8</sup> For Jews, the Temple was seen as the locus of God's presence. Therefore, somewhat shockingly, John's gospel describes that divine presence, or "glory," (see, for example: John 1:14; 2:1; 8:54; 11:4,40; 12:28-29; 16:12-15; 17:1,4-5,10,22,24.) as being *in* Jesus even to the point that his own body is designated the new "Temple" (John 2:18-22; see also John 1:51; 4:20-24). Indeed, later in John when Jesus is talking to his disciples, he says: "When the Spirit comes . . . he will *glorify* me because *it is from* me that he will receive what he will make known *to you*" (John 16:13-15). And that "glory" becomes realized *after* the resurrection in John's Gospel (see John 20:20-23). There is, evidently, an important connection between God's "glory" and "presence," and the divine Spirit. Note too that in John the Spirit is given on Easter Sunday, whereas this takes place at Pentecost in Luke. The careful about treating these texts as *literal* history, but see it as a *theological* understanding of history.

<sup>9</sup> Ezek 36:26-27; see also Heb 8:10; Jer 31:33. Recall too the Spirit of God bring the dry bones back to life; Ezek 37:1-14.

But *when* would that happen? It *began* with Jesus the Messiah; the Spirit was uniquely concentrated in the person of Jesus while he was Earth - and Luke mentions this many times in his Gospel.<sup>10</sup> He also said that just prior to Christ's ascension, Jesus commanded his followers: "Don't leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."<sup>11</sup>

As Luke relates the Church's story, this baptism with<sup>12</sup> the Spirit is the momentous event that propels the book of Acts into motion. He places the birth of the church with the first major Jewish festival after the death of Jesus, namely, the Feast of Weeks, 50 days after the Passover and hence also known as "Pentecost." This festival marks the *beginning* of the wheat harvest, a celebration of the *first fruits* of the new crop. The *beginning* of this new community of followers of Jesus was also likely *in* Luke's mind, and having experienced those first fruits, there is confidence of a greater harvest to follow. Coincidentally, because this feast occurs around the same time of year as the covenant-making moment at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19, it also became a celebration of the giving of the 10 Commandments to Moses. Pentecost then became an appropriate festival for recommitment and rededication, and hence was a special time of *pilgrimage* for devout Jews to visit Jerusalem from across the known world.

As we heard earlier, Luke tells us the disciples were all together in one place when God's mysterious presence came in *power*, as Jesus had promised.<sup>13</sup> Luke's mention of a *violent wind* from heaven and *tongues of flame* means that the prophesied coming of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled beyond a doubt. What happened was that the untamable Spirit filled *everyone* present; God does not give half-measures, but is lavish. And, according to Luke, in this first instance they started speaking in other human languages.<sup>14</sup> Devout Jews who were in Jerusalem for the pilgrimage from all corners of the Roman Empire were completely baffled because they *could* understand the disciples' message *in their own native languages*. Curiously, this was an *unnecessary sign* as everyone understood Greek!

Luke, being the dramatic and symbolic story teller that he is, may have had another Old Testament image in mind. In Genesis 11 we read the strange story of the Tower of Babel.<sup>15</sup> We're told everyone at that time spoke just *one* language and so they started to build a tall tower to "the heavens" for their *own* glory. The story goes on to say that God was not impressed and so he *confused* their speech by

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<sup>10</sup> For example: Luke 4:1, 14, 18, 33-44. For example, in Luke 4:1 Jesus is described as "*full* of the Holy Spirit."

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1:4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Whether the baptism is "in" or "with" or "by" the Holy Spirit is irrelevant; "*en*" is just a small word in Greek, one which can be easily translated in different ways. Christian Baptism in the name of the Trinity obviously includes the Holy Spirit; but baptism is not a 'once-done' act (a social right of passage to be forgotten), it has *ongoing* consequences. See also [26].

<sup>13</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>14</sup> This is "xenolalia," i.e., the ability to speak in a language which the individual has not learned, not "glossolalia," i.e. "speaking in tongues" or unknown languages (babbling or incoherent) encountered in intense religious experiences.

<sup>15</sup> Gen 11:1-9. The place where this ziggurat was built was Babylon. There is *no* evidence in Acts that hints to Luke making a connection with the Tower of Babel; this, however, does not rule out the possibility. It is worth noting that while the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) has parallels the song of Hannah (1 Sam2:1-10), "he has scattered those whose pride wells up from the sheer arrogance of their hearts" could be allusion to the Tower of Babel, as well as a reference to King Herod.

giving them multiple languages. Consequently, they could no longer understand each other and had to stop building the tower. The people then *dispersed* across the world. *If* there is a connection here, the fact that Jews from all regions of the world are now able to understand what Peter is saying signifies that God is doing a dramatic *new* thing, bringing *unity* out of disunity, and *gathering in* his harvest of dispersed people.<sup>16</sup>

When something like this happens, there is usually more than one response. One group asked: “What does all this mean?” Another group mocked, “They are all drunk on new wine!” In the face of this public skepticism, the Spirit of God spoke through Peter. One-third of the book of Acts is taken up with *speeches*, which was – in Luke’s day - a well-established literary technique to explain the *meaning* of events. Moreover, the Old Testament prophets were commissioned by God before they spoke as his *messengers* to the people; for example, Isaiah had his lips touched by a purifying fire.<sup>17</sup> In this context, the tongues of fire could therefore be additionally understood as freshly inspired prophetic speech. Luke was therefore emphasizing that Peter should be deemed as *authentically* interpreting the prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures and proclaiming *God’s* message for *his* day. His message was *insightful* and it was a speech that was not only *boldly*-delivered, but one that also *persuaded*. The *effectiveness* of that authority was demonstrated by how 3000 people responded and the Church was born. This was a *sure* sign of God’s continuing presence in Peter and the rest of the apostles.

As a part of his sermon, Peter reinterprets Joel’s prophecy as being fulfilled in these “last days,” that’s the time between Christ’s first advent and his return. God *has* indeed fulfilled that promise, says Peter, and poured out his Spirit on *all* people in surprisingly unconventional ways. The Spirit was given so that young and old people - both male *and* female - will proclaim God’s activities. More shockingly, God’s Spirit was not just for kings and priests, but was “even” given to lowly *slaves*. Later on in Acts, Luke tells us how the Holy Spirit was also given to non-Jews!<sup>18</sup> God’s Spirit blows like a mighty wind and has no respect for status, gender, age, or race – *God’s Spirit is for all God’s people, the Church, and for the benefit of the whole community*. Peter then goes on to say that we therefore need not live in fear, even if the very fabric of society is collapsing around us, because – and here he quotes from the prophet Joel - “*Everyone* (not just Jews) who calls on the name of *Jesus* will be rescued on the great Day of LORD.”<sup>19</sup> What will one day be a future reality – namely God *living among us*, as it says in the Book of Revelation<sup>20</sup> - begins right now. God does the saving, but we must allow ourselves to be rescued. At this present

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<sup>16</sup> The *theological* point also being God’s Spirit is now *extending* the kingdom of God through Israel *to the rest* of the world.

<sup>17</sup> Isa 6:7.

<sup>18</sup> See Acts 10 for the story of Peter and Cornelius; see also:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/God%E2%80%99s-Outside-The-Box-Thinking.pdf> .

<sup>19</sup> Acts 2:21. The quote mentions “name of the LORD” (from Joel 2:28-32); I have reinterpreted “LORD” Christologically! (I suspect Peter/Luke would likely agree – see Acts 2:36,38!) Recall that Luke was writing after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, so in his readers’ minds there may have been an expectancy that the end of history was near. See also Luke 21:25–28; 21:25. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-God-of-New-Beginnings-.pdf> .

<sup>20</sup> See Rev 21:3 (indeed, the whole of Rev 21-22.)

time, then, we live in a hope-filled era of Spirit-empowered mission and salvation, one that is available for *all* peoples, regardless of *any* reason for exclusion that we might invent; yes, to *all* those who will listen and respond to God's call.

That's all fantastic news and gives us the overall *context* of this Pentecost experience; but what *else* might all this mean *for us, today*?

The Holy Spirit always goes *ahead* of the Church<sup>21</sup> and often in surprising ways, ones that pushes her perceived boundaries. Later in Acts we read how the Church was persecuted, yet that tragedy was a means for the gospel to spread *outside* of the early Church's "comfort zone."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Church history is littered with reformers, some of whom propelled the Church into lasting, creative and unforeseen directions. Unsought stressors from *both* inside *and* outside the Church *can* be the means for *positive* change *within* the Church. Now this does *not* mean that God's Spirit *orchestrated* the persecution or that he *instigates* disunity within the church as a means for her growth. Rather, the Spirit is *always* at work trying to bring good out of evil. And this is a reminder that the Church is always on *God's* mission - and *not* one her own making!

Today, the world-wide Church is being impacted by COVID, forcing her to try to *be* the "church" in novel ways.<sup>23</sup> While this may be a temporary phase, I suspect the new "normal" for a typical church's life will look very different from its pre-COVID experience – and for some considerable time to come. Indeed, this might precipitate the closure of some church buildings. However, as long as a congregation sees itself first and foremost as a part of *God's* Church, then the Holy Spirit will continue to go ahead of the true Church in her on-going mission to bear witness to Jesus and his Way. This time of trial for any local congregation is, then, an opportunity to reassess *its* priorities and to reflect on what it means to "*be the Church*" in a community. For example, I hope it may result in more cooperation between denominations in a locality as we rediscover that what unites us is greater than our differences. Surely that would be an example of a work of the Spirit in our age. Adaptation to *doing* and *being* the "church" in creative new ways is always painful, because we don't like change. The book of Acts gives examples of that pain and frustration, as do Paul's letters. Yet God remains ever creative *and* faithful; will we?

Finally, as we have heard, God's Spirit has been active within the world since the beginning of creation. And now, since that dramatic moment at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been given to *all* those who God calls his own. Even so, we know from experience that we soon need to be "refilled" with the Spirit because we leak like sieves. This reminds us of our need to be continually dependent upon *God*, and *not* upon ourselves. Being "filled with the Spirit" is not a static state which we can claim as a permanent

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<sup>21</sup> Although the Spirit was given *to* the Church at Pentecost, he is *not* the exclusive 'property' of the Church!

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Acts 8:1-8. This does *not* mean God *caused* the persecution, though Luke himself might have thought that! Note the later friction between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41) resulted in the gospel spreading *despite* their disunity, which itself is hardly something God desired.

<sup>23</sup> Such as using zoom, Facebook live, YouTube services, as well as practical aid via porch drop-offs, etc.

possession, it is a continual reminder that we must come again and again to the Source of the Waters of Life and to be replenished.<sup>24</sup> Just as Holy Communion - which celebrated last week - is to be constantly repeated until Christ returns,<sup>25</sup> so we need to be continually refilled by his life-giving Spirit.<sup>26</sup> So, as we pray with persistence for that renewal, let's remember those earlier words of Jesus to his followers: God is generous and kind by nature, far more than we are; consequently, "how *much more* will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"<sup>27</sup> Amen.

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<sup>24</sup> See John 4:13-14; 7:28-39. This can be adapted to include the waters of baptism in the name/authority of the Father, Son, and Spirit; Matt 28:18-20. See also [12].

<sup>25</sup> Not merely as a "reminder" but to "*feed on him* (Christ) in our hearts, by faith with thanksgiving," as the liturgy puts it.

<sup>26</sup> For without the *life-giving* Holy Spirit, the Church is *dead!*

<sup>27</sup> Luke 11:13.