

"The Spirit of Pentecost"
(sermon given 5/23/10 by Scott Jansen)
John 14:8-18, 25-27

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[Prayer for Illumination] Spirit of the Living Lord, fall afresh upon us. Put a powerful fire in our hearts, that we may see our own lives the way that you see them; and know your intentions for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray... Amen.

Well today is Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. You probably know the story since we read it every year. There was a gathering of Jews from all over the world, Jews of many different races and languages; and somehow, miraculously, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they were all able to connect with God through Peter's preaching.... In other words, hearing a word from God... comes more from your connection with the Holy Spirit... than from your proficiency in any particular human language. So, rather than read the Pentecost story again this year, I thought I'd read this story from John's gospel about the Holy Spirit. Listen now, for God's word for you....

Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me... has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. But if you do not, then, believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you..., the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do... and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it....

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you

forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you....

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 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. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

Scott: On Pentecost Sunday, there was a great rushing of wind and smoke and flame, and different voices were raised, with different accents, representing many different cultures. And the Holy Spirit brought all those different kinds of people, not only together with God, but also together with one another.

Mary Ann: Thanks for inviting us to raise our voices.... What I want to know is, What was "Pentecost" before Christianity? Why were all those people gathered there in the first place?

Scott: Well, it started out as a feast day to celebrate the barley harvest, which was the first fresh produce they ate after eating stored foods all winter. It was the beginning of a new year of harvests, a new year of hope.

But then Pentecost changed, as holidays often do. During the Babylonian exile, Pentecost began to symbolize the time when Moses received the Law, with the Ten Commandments, from God. It symbolized how the old way of existing in the world was over, and a new way began. When God intervened upon the Earth to give us the Law, that was like a whole new world order being established. That's what the Jews were celebrating when they arrived at Pentecost.

Bill V.: Scott, I've heard you say that Pentecost, in your view, is like the "end of the world" that the gospels mention. Why do you think that?

Scott: For the Jews, Pentecost meant that God had ended the old world and started a new one, through the giving of the Law. For a Christian, God ended the old world and started a new one, through

the giving of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost came with signs of fire and smoke and wind, and it happened before all of the disciples' generation passed away, just as Jesus predicted. In our gospel reading, Jesus says that when the Holy Spirit comes to you, it will be I, Jesus, who is coming to you. So the second coming of Jesus, in my opinion, happened when Jesus came... via the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Fred K.: But what if you're wrong, and it has not happened yet? Lots of people think it's still looming in the future.

Scott: Well, I could be wrong. But I don't think it matters much. If I believed it was still in the future, but that it could be any time in the future, possibly another two thousand years, or a hundred thousand years, in the future..., I don't think I'd live my life any differently. The only belief that would make a difference would be if I believed that the end of the world were coming very soon, sometime in my lifetime. That would change things. But I don't see any reason to suggest that that is likely. So, I just focus on living my life as God would want, and I don't get too hung up on understanding all of the Biblical passages about "the end."

Virginia Y.: So if living your life the right way matters more than believing all the correct doctrines, how are we supposed to live our lives?

Scott: That's exactly what the disciples were asking Jesus after he told them he was about to leave them. They didn't care so much what they ought to believe. They never asked Jesus to write out a systematic theology for them. They just wanted to know what to do. And Jesus replied, "I will not leave you orphaned." I will not leave you without a guide for your lives. I will send to you the Holy Spirit. Just wait, and pray for the Holy Spirit, and follow what the Holy Spirit calls you to do.

Will V.: So, the Holy Spirit is the guide? What about the Bible? Isn't the Bible the guide for our lives?

Scott: Well, the Bible is very important, but you'll notice Jesus doesn't ever mention the Bible. He could have pretty dramatically changed the course of Christianity if he had said, "I will not leave you orphaned—I will send to you a Bible that will teach you all things." But he didn't say that. He said, "I will send to you the Holy Spirit, who will

teach you all things.” We must never forget that the Holy Spirit is one with God. The Holy Spirit is divine. The Bible is just a subordinate human artifact, one of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit. But when we ask ourselves how we should live, the Holy Spirit is our ultimate guide, and the Bible is just one of the many works of the Holy Spirit to be considered. The Bible is like an anchor to keep our interpretation of the Holy Spirit from getting too far off course.

Lily L.: But, sometimes the Bible is hard to understand. Like, how could all those people have tongues of fire on the tops of their heads... without getting burned?

Scott: Well, I think sometimes we take it all a little too literally. Actually it says that something “like” fire was inspiring them..., just as it says that it was something “like” wind that was blowing through the gathering of disciples. And this was written some thirty or forty years after the original event. So, sometimes the best way to understand the Bible is to ask yourself, what would this text mean to the writer of this story? The early Christian church brought Jews and Gentiles together, people of every different race and language. And that was a pretty new idea to the world at that time, a pretty powerful new idea—that one God could connect such very different people. How should the author have symbolized the incredible new power of God’s Holy Spirit???? Well, “something like fire” or “something like wind” was probably about as good a metaphor as anything.

Daniel S.: That one is pretty straightforward, but there are other parts of the Bible that are even more difficult to understand. For example, the passage you read tells us that Jesus will give us whatever we ask in his name—what does that mean?

Scott: Well, first let’s talk about what it does not mean. It does not mean that I ask for whatever my little heart desires, and then I tack on the words, “in Jesus name” at the end of my prayer, and then God is obligated to grant my prayer request. I can tell you from firsthand knowledge, that that is not true. Actually, if you read the entire verse, it says, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” In other words, asking for something in Christ’s name... means asking for something with the intention of glorifying God. If your intention is to glorify yourself, or to take care of your own private concerns, that is different from intending to glorify God. That does not count as asking for something

“in Jesus’ name,” even if you use those words at the end of your prayer.

Russel B.: As long as we’re talking about confusing Bible verses..., Why does Jesus say that we will do “even greater deeds” than he did?

Scott: I think the author of John’s gospel certainly felt that that had already happened.... Jesus spoke with different factions within the Jewish family. He reconciled the traitorous tax collectors and the poor sinners (who could not keep all the points of the law) with the more mainline Jews. He brought every different kind of Jew together. And he spoke with a few Samaritans and a few Romans and various Gentiles, but he did not bring whole communities together. He pointed the way, the path to reconciliation. But it was the Church that the apostles built that went beyond the work of Jesus, reconciling large numbers of Gentiles with Jews so that they could even worship together without distinction. As more and more groups of diverse people are coming together, we see more and more of God’s will being done. In our day, we have the potential, at least, to move beyond the tribalism that has scattered Africa for thousands of years. We hear rumblings of 19 nations in ACOTA and the African Union of peacekeeping forces. We also have the potential, at least, to construct a lasting peace in the Middle East. This is the direction in which God has always been pushing us. How far we choose to follow God’s will is entirely up to us. We certainly can do greater deeds than Jesus did, if we faithfully continue on the path that Jesus started for us.

Jim M.: That sounds like a lot of work. I thought we just had to believe in Jesus—believe that he did all the work for us....

Scott: Well, I want you to listen to these words from John’s gospel again. Jesus says, quote, “Very truly, I tell you..., the one who believes in me... will also do the works that I do....” Jesus did want us to believe in him. He wanted us to believe in his mission. He wanted us to believe that he was truly initiating the kingdom of God on Earth. But he did not want us to just believe with our minds. He never said, “I have done all the work there is to do.... Now you all just have to sit around and enjoy the fruits of my labor.” No. And, that’s certainly not the attitude that the early apostles displayed. They traveled to the North, the South, the East, and the West, trying to bring more and

more different kinds of people all together to worship the one Creator God.

The Spirit of Pentecost is not simply a gift from God that you receive when you ask God to give you something special. The Spirit of Pentecost is a powerful force from God that sends you out—out of your comfort zone, out of the groups of people who are just like yourself; to try to reconcile more and more of the world unto God. The Spirit of Pentecost lights a fire under your seat, and gets you moving. God has called ALL peoples into one unified family. It is a wondrous thing to behold. But it's an even more wondrous thing to experience God's power, working on God's plan, through your own hands, through your own voices. Let us all embrace, with a little reckless abandon, the Spirit of Pentecost.

Amen.