

Waiting for the Spirit

MJCF

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Acts 1:1-8, 2:1-17a

Happy Pentecost! Do people say that in the church? I don't think I've heard it like that before! Anyway, today is Pentecost. The name "Pentecost" comes from the Greek word meaning 50. Approximately 50 days after the Passover celebration, the Jews celebrated the harvest festival of Pentecost. It was at this time that the Holy Spirit filled Jesus' disciples. Before the Holy Spirit filled them they lacked confidence. They were fearful, and keeping to themselves. After they were filled, they were suddenly bold and joyful, sharing the good news of Jesus with anyone who would listen – even to political leaders who arrested them. It was a huge transformation. In Acts 4:13 it says, "...when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus." Have you experienced the power of the Holy Spirit at work in your life? Does your life look like the disciples before they were filled with the Spirit, or after they were filled with the Spirit? The Spirit of Jesus Christ is now here. But, it often takes time for believers to deeply receive the Spirit. Are you waiting to be filled with the Spirit as the disciples were waiting before Pentecost?

The story of Pentecost is found in "The Acts of the Apostles," but a more appropriate name may be "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" because the Holy Spirit is really the main character throughout the book. Just before he ascends to heaven, we read that Jesus "ordered [his disciples] not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father..." (chapter 1, verse 4). Earlier, in the Gospel of Luke, we read something similar. There, Jesus says, "...I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high (chapter 24, verse 49). Jesus tells the disciples they would be "baptised with the Holy Spirit" as John the Baptist had earlier predicted, but they would first have to wait a number of days. Jesus tells them, "...You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The story of Acts is a story of power – the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ at work among believers, but before that happened, they had to wait.

Acts, chapter two describes what happened after their wait. Jesus' followers numbered about 120, meeting in one house. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven, like a violent wind. It was the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word, pneuma and the Hebrew word, ruach mean both wind and spirit, perhaps because both the wind and the Spirit are invisible and unpredictable forces. In the story, we read that not only was there a sound, but there was also something to see. The presence of the Spirit came in the form of flames above the group, connecting with each person. Just like when God called Moses from a burning bush, fire represented God's presence. Fire as a symbol of purification, shows the holiness and the power of God. In being filled with the Spirit, the disciples are empowered.

This power had a purpose. It was given to the disciples in order for them to be witnesses of Jesus Christ "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends to the earth." (v.8) Each of these locations represents expanding geographical boundaries. We are also called to share our experiences of Jesus. That's why I'd like to continue to work on learning how to talk about our daily faith experiences. We share Christ's love with others through our actions, but we also need to use words. One of the extraordinary things that happened at Pentecost was that the disciples began to speak in foreign languages. This could have been a miracle in how the disciples were able to speak, but it could also have been a miracle in how people were able to hear and understand. At least 14 different place names, representing over 14 different languages were being spoken by these local disciples. It's interesting that some scoffers just thought that they were "filled with new wine." (v.13) Earlier, when using an illustration of old and new wineskins, Jesus had actually described the good news as "New wine." (Luke 5:37-39) So, in that sense, the disciples were filled with "new wine" of the Gospel! Peter explains to the crowd that the miracles they were experiencing were evidence that God was

pouring out the Holy Spirit “on all flesh.” The prophecy was being fulfilled, and the disciples were empowered to share what God has done, in various languages.

Returning to the question I raised earlier, “Does your life look like the disciples before they were filled with the Spirit, or after they were filled with the Spirit?” I imagine many of us go back and forth... When Jesus first called his disciples, they left what they were doing and immediately followed him. The Spirit of God was already at work in their lives. When we make a decision to follow Jesus and get baptised, we may experience it as a huge life-changing decision, but there’s more to our life with Jesus than this one decision. After baptism, we learn a lot about what Jesus taught, but we need to be committed to the Spirit of Jesus, himself, rather than our limited knowledge about Jesus. We grow in relationship with the Spirit of Jesus by reading God’s word in the Bible, praying, and spending time with other believers. Without that, it will be hard to be filled with the Spirit.

Many Christians think “they have arrived” and there’s not much more to do. Some have suggested that after baptism, believers become arrogant, prideful, and develop a feeling of superiority over people who are not Christian. Many Christians act like they are “full of themselves.” During their years with Jesus, the disciples often acted this way. They argued among themselves about who was the greatest. And, when Jesus was arrested, the disciples all panicked and ran away. Peter followed Jesus at a distance, but when questioned, three times, he denied having anything to do with Jesus. It is only later, at Pentecost that the disciples were deeply filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ, ready even to die for him. The Spirit changed them from being fearful, and overconfident in themselves to feeling a courageous trust, and humility before God. They moved from feeling superior to others to accepting all people as brothers and sisters. The good news is for all people, both Christian and non-Christian. The mission of the disciples became helping everyone around them to realise what God has done through Jesus, encouraging them to repent or change their old ways of thinking, and celebrate what God is doing.

I often long for a Pentecost experience. I have moments when I sense the Holy Spirit has been working, but there are also times that I feel there are areas deep down in my life that are not yet fully open to the Spirit. I’m learning to confess those areas where I’ve held on to control, where I’ve lacked trust in God. The longings for God’s Spirit to work in my life increase as I wait and pray for clarity of God’s will. Maybe that’s why God allows us times when we need to wait. Some people may feel like the disciples on Good Friday, after Jesus was crucified. They had to wait until Sunday before they learned that God was still in control and that Jesus was raised to life.

As the disciples waited for the promise of the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled, no one knew when it would happen. Jesus had ordered them to not leave the city until they were empowered by the Spirit. They waited at least a week, and I imagine some of the people may have given up and left. It’s important to note what the disciples did while they waited. We didn’t read it today, but a key verse is Acts chapter one, verse 14. “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.” Followers of Jesus, both men and women were waiting together, constantly devoting themselves to prayer. That would have been a pretty intense week of prayer! It causes me to wonder if we spend enough time in that kind of prayer!

For at least a few years now, Rie and I have been praying about the possibility that God is calling us to move back to Japan. We do sense God’s call to return, but it has felt like we’ve been waiting for clarity, for a long time! The timing to move never really felt right, and so we continued to pray and wait. As we wait, we are trying to prepare, even though we do not yet know when we’ll actually be able to go. We also continue to pray for clarity on the mission that God has for MJCF. I feel a lot of hope for our church, because I see the Spirit of God at work in the way people have grown. God has continued to lead us as a church through various experiences.

Personally, I’m deeply feeling a sense that I need to learn to let go of control in some areas. Anytime I step out in faith, it’s usually only after I’ve thought through all the angles of what might

happen, so that I feel I'm ready for anything. But, if all my steps of faith are calculated out like that, it becomes just me doing things, rather than walking with Jesus and trusting in him to lead.

Whatever our situation, we often need to wait to hear God's answers to our questions. Waiting empties us so that we can be filled with the Spirit. When we don't wait, or spend time in honest prayer it's easy to fill our time with "good work for God." We slip into living by our own energy, and end up burning out. Waiting creates a thirst for God. Once we reach the point where we feel like there is nothing more that we can do, God can finally have space to do something in our lives.

After worship last week, one of the stories we looked at was the miracle of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. Trapped between Pharaoh's army and the sea, Moses tells the people, "Don't be afraid. Just stand still and watch the LORD rescue you today." This is the essence of Holy War. We don't do the fighting. God is the one who does the work. All we need to do is to be still. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." It's not easy to be still without having our mind rush around trying to fix everything. We need to practice resting our minds, in silence, listening for God to speak to our hearts. I came across this story about listening:

"Before refrigerators, people used icehouses to preserve their food. Icehouses had thick walls, no windows and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the icehouses and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer.

One man lost a valuable watch while working in an icehouse. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the icehouse during the noon hour and soon [came out] with the watch.

Amazed, the men asked him how he found it.

'I closed the door,' the boy replied, 'lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking.'"

Often, we do not hear God speak to us because we do not listen well enough.

In our prayers, it is important to leave space, and listen for the Spirit of God to speak to our hearts. Let's pray.

Loving God, as we read about the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples at Pentecost, we are amazed at the miracles that happened. We long to be more fully committed to you, and filled with the Spirit today. O Lord, teach us to pray, and to wait for you. Help us to focus on you rather than be too caught up in our own problems. Thank-you for your church, that we have brothers and sisters in the faith with whom we can give and receive encouragement. O Lord, may our trust in you increase, and may our self-centred cares decrease, that you maybe glorified in our lives, through Christ we pray, Amen.