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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Acts 2:1-13

23 May 2021

The Spirit Arrives

Opening Prayer:

Let us pray. Powerful creator and sustainer, breathe your spirit upon us as you did two thousand years ago. Empower our voices to ring out with the stories of your power and love in our lives.

Guide us as we live by the hope of your Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sermon:

Last Sunday, we explored transitions. We reviewed the journey that we have been walking through Lent, Holy Week, Easter, the season of resurrection, and now, the culmination of Jesus's absence and the community's commitment, Pentecost, our celebration of the coming and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Just like the early church community in the upper room, we have been in transition, wondering what our next steps are as individuals and as a church. The new safety guidelines for gathering on Sunday morning are a sign that we are moving out of the season of pandemic, a season with a diversity of overwhelming feelings and emotions. But now, what is next? As the disciples thought, can we go back to life as it was, or is God leading us into something new, calling us to something deeper? Should church and our involvement in it just go back to the way that it was a year and a half ago? Are there different ways of being church that we would like to explore as a community? Are there pieces of our experience during the pandemic that we want to keep, truths and convictions that we want to

name and bring to the forefront of our corporate and individual journeys? As we reflect on these questions, we wait and pray together.

Our scripture in Acts 2 begins with the festival of first fruits or the festival of weeks, what came to be known as Pentecost in the second century BCE. Pentecost means literally 50 days because there were 50 days between Passover and the first day of this festival. Acts 2:1 says, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” When the day had come, the group of 120 Jesus-followers was waiting and praying together as Jesus had told them. If you have a bible near you or have your bible with you this morning, please turn to Exodus 23. Exodus 23; God and Moses are on top of Mt. Sinai, where God is giving Moses the terms of the covenant or agreement that God is making with the nation of Israel. This covenant-people will celebrate 3 yearly festivals. First is Passover and the feast of unleavened bread, a reminder of who freed them from slavery and showed up the power of the Egyptian empire. Jesus reframes this Jewish festival during holy week with bread and wine. Jesus’s new covenant, sealed with his broken body and shed blood, frees all people from the power of sin, death, and empire, while also exemplifying a new way of being human, loving our friends and enemies.

The second festival is the festival of first-fruits, also called the festival of weeks. It is the traditional time of the wheat harvest. If you have a bible open to Exodus 23, look at verse 14; it says, “Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. 15 You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed. 16 You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field.” Two hundred years before Jesus, this harvest festival becomes known as Pentecost, a reference to the 50 days between it and Passover and a sign of how the Israelites

had lost connection with the land after exile. After 7 sets of 7-day weeks, or 49 days, on the fiftieth day, the people will bring bread to the temple, made from the first gleanings of the wheat harvest. All men were to take their bread to the temple yearly as a reminder of who had entrusted them with the land and as a reminder that they were to share their harvest and provide for their neighbors so that all could flourish in God's blessing.

In Acts chapter 2 on the first day of Pentecost, the first-fruits of Jesus's new kingdom are coming to harvest. These first followers and disciples are the seeds of the new kingdom, watered by the power of the Holy Spirit at this moment on the first day of the festival of first-fruits, and growing into the hands and feet of the ascended Jesus, who had left them behind not too many days before. As Jesus had already told them, "the harvest is plentiful." This new community of spirit-filled followers of Jesus are the workers for this harvest.

The stage is set then as we read the rest of chapter 2 of Acts. If you still have your bibles, turn to Exodus 19, while also keeping a marking finger in Acts chapter 2. In Exodus 19, we can begin to make sense of the next few verses of Acts 2. Exodus 19... starting with verse 16 says, "On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17 Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. 19 As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. 20 When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up." Keeping this image in mind, turn back to Acts 2, verses 2-3, where it says, "And suddenly from heaven there came a

sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.”

Just as God had come down to give the law and terms of the covenant with Israel, God is doing something new, something that God had promised many years before in the prophets. No longer, like on Mount Sinai, would the words of God be on tablets of stone or on scrolls, but they would be planted in the hearts and minds of the people, God’s image-bearers. This is what is happening, like wind and fire, the presence of God comes down to the upper room to the 120. God’s presence, his Spirit, the breath of God, fills each person there. A new covenant is being enacted as Jesus had already said at the Lord’s supper so many weeks ago. The law of love, living by the spirit, baptism in the very presence and power of God is the way the God’s kingdom is going to take the world by storm.

Hopefully, you still have your bibles nearby. Turn to the book of Galatians, chapter 5, in which Paul is trying to explain to the house churches of Galatia that the terms of God’s first covenant with Israel have been fulfilled in Jesus. The Galatians new life in Jesus the Messiah is marked not by following God’s covenant with the nation of Israel, but by joining the covenant that Jesus has begun through the power of the Spirit. If you are in Galatians 5, look at verse 18, where Paul writes, “if you are led by the spirit, you are not subject to the law.” Now jump to verse 22, in which Paul describes the fruits that will be harvested in a life led by the spirit. Paul writes, “the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.” In this first day of the festival of first-fruits or Pentecost, the spirit is poured out on the community of Jesus-followers. Fire and wind mark God’s coming as God had done on the day of Jesus’s baptism and had done on Mount Sinai. God’s kingdom fruit will be harvested among the people, in the form of becoming more

authentic bearers of God's image, by sacrificing and crucifying our old, broken selves with Jesus and drawing new life from the Spirit of God, new creation in the power and presence of God.

If you still have a finger in Acts chapter 2, look back again to verse 4. We have heard the sound and seen the tongues of fire. The Spirit now fills all of the believers, and each one has their own audible response. Verse 4 says, "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability." The people in the upper room though were not the only ones who had heard the sound of a violent wind. A crowd of people had gathered outside the house, wondering about the loud sound. Then the spirit-filled believers begin speaking other languages, and the crowd is even more confused. Jewish people living in Jerusalem but coming from different parts of the empire and speaking different languages are amazed to hear these peasants from Galilee speaking each other's language, specifically telling everyone about God's deeds of power. These deeds of power are all that we have studied over the last three months on Sunday mornings.

Before we get too far along, I need you to turn in your bibles to Genesis 11. Genesis 11, starting at verse 1, says, "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' 5 The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 6 And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their

language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."

Notice in Acts 2 verse 1 that the 120 Jesus-followers are together in one place as the ancient people were in Genesis. However, unlike the ancient people, this new community's inability to communicate the gospel to their neighbors is overcome by the power of God. In Genesis, languages are given so that humans do not become too confident in their own power, strength, and ingenuity, but in Acts, languages are given so that the story of God's redemption for all of creation is not limited but expanded to all people. God makes a way by the power and leading of the Spirit where there seems to be no way. Galilean peasants will spread the gospel as Jesus had told them to but not through all of their own good ideas, but through their dependence and anticipation on God's action and provision. Even when our own limitations seem to tie us down, the Holy Spirit gives us what we need when we need it.

Finally, please turn for the last time just a few pages back in your bible to Luke chapter 5. After the crowd hears these Galileans speaking in their many different languages, two responses are mentioned by Luke at the end of our passage in Acts chapter 2. The first is a curiosity, a longing to know the meaning of such amazing and astounding events. The second is the standard cynical response to the gospel that has appeared throughout Luke's gospel, which is that this group of Galileans must be drunk with new wine, having started early in their celebration of Pentecost. Now if you look at Luke chapter 5, the cynics' comments will take on new meaning. Starting with verse 36, "Jesus also told them a parable: 'No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise, the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will

not match the old. 37 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. 38 But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.” The 120 might be drunk on new wine, but it is not fermented juice that Luke is thinking of, but the promise of the new kingdom that Jesus has begun. The disciples are drunk on the wine of the Holy Spirit’s power. The irony of the critics’ comments about these followers of Jesus reminds us that Jesus’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension can only be understood by people who have eyes to see and ears to hear the gospel.

So, what do we make of all of these scripture texts and connections between what is happening in the first Pentecost experience for the early church and what is happening in Hutterthal Mennonite Church in Freeman, South Dakota? Throwing around bible verses is only as helpful as the clarity of mission and hope that they bring us about Jesus’s kingdom and our calling. First, we can reflect on how can we live by the Spirit, by the law of Christ, by the law of sacrificial love, today? What fruit are we bearing in our lives? Is it fruit of the Spirit of God, the empowering and emboldening Spirit? Or is it fruit of a different kind of spirit? A spirit that brings hopelessness or hate or violence or fear or anxiety? What fruits are you noticing in this season at Hutterthal? What fruits are you noticing in your own faith journey?

Second, in a time when we as consumers are central to all that is happening, feeling as though the world is at our finger tips and little can prevent us from getting whatever we want, we realize too that we are in need of God’s saving help, that we are not always in control or able to stay in control. Just as the disciples’ own lack of language would limit their ability to spread the gospel even in Jerusalem, we have moments in which we are hit in the face with our own limits, our own lack of knowledge or experience. In those moments, we look to Jesus, awaiting a fresh outpouring of the Spirit, who will enable us to move forward in power God’s time.

Ending Prayer:

Let us pray: Spirit of the living and gracious creator, fall fresh on us this morning. Empower us to live into God's in-breaking and powerful kingdom. Guide us in the sacrificial and love-driven way of Jesus. Give us the strength to wait and pray together when we do not know the way forward, or we feel as if we have hit our limit. Thank you that you provide even in those moments when we have nearly given up. In Jesus's name, Amen