

The Church Launched by the Holy Spirit

Acts 1, 2

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You can launch a boat to get it into the water where it needs to be. You can launch a rocket to move it toward its destination carrying its payload. Sometimes the start of a new business or other enterprise is called the “launch.”

In terms of our prayers for this church that God would help us be all God wants us to be and reading Acts 1 and 2, my prayer is that God would make us empowered witnesses and that we would truly be part of the church that the Holy Spirit launched on the Day of Pentecost sometime around A.D. 30.

We often call Pentecost “the birthday of the church.” And we’re celebrating it that way today. The church got started that day. But there’s continuity between what God had been doing, what God did that day, and what God continues to do. The birth of the church at Pentecost is part of the ongoing story of God’s dealing with Israel and the world. It continues the story of what God did in Jesus of Nazareth. Acts is the second volume of Luke’s writing—the Gospel of Luke was volume 1. The first volume was about “all that Jesus began to do and teach.” Volume 2 is about what Jesus continues to do and teach through the Holy Spirit in the church. At Pentecost, followers of Jesus, gathered in prayer, are filled with the Holy Spirit, formed into the church, and sent out (launched) into the world on God’s mission.

Now, they’re not called the church until chapter 5 of Acts. But this group in chapter 2 is the beginning of the movement described later. They’re the church formed by the Holy Spirit, filled and empowered by the Spirit, and launched into life and mission by the Spirit. The church’s DNA is in these early experiences. We share that DNA, we’re still part of that move of God, the same Holy Spirit is present and active in our lives and in our life together as a church.

Let’s look at what it means to be the church launched by the Holy Spirit. *The church is people. The church is people filled with the Holy Spirit.*

The church is people empowered by the Spirit to be Jesus' witnesses. The church is people in community that's created by the Holy Spirit.

The church is people. We sang about that this morning:

I am the church! You are the church!

We are the church together!

All who follow Jesus, all around the world!

Yes, we're the church together!

(The United Methodist Hymnal #558)

On that Pentecost in Jerusalem, people were gathered. Luke says there were about 120 of them (Acts 1:15). He names several: Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James (13). There were also the women. He mentions some in the Gospel: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others (Luke 8:2-3). Mary the mother of Jesus was in this group, along with Jesus' brothers. Matthew and Mark give us their names: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3).

Another Judas who had been one of the Twelve Apostles was missing. He killed himself after he betrayed Jesus. So Peter proposed that they select someone to take Judas' place to keep the Twelve intact, symbolizing the connection with Israel, God's people. So Luke names two more men who were present: Joseph called Barsabbas or Justus and Matthias. These two were among a group who had been together the whole time Jesus was among them (1:21-23). Isn't it fascinating that there's this larger group of Jesus' followers beyond the ones who are named?

These are the people who were together. They were praying and doing what they knew to do as they waited for what Jesus promised. They were all together in one place—probably the upper room where they had met before. And then this amazing event happens.

The church is people filled with the Holy Spirit. Something that sounded like wind filled the room and something that looked like fire came to rest on each person. All through Scripture, wind and flame symbolize the presence of God. God is present and active here with these 120 followers of

Jesus. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4). What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? In Luke's Gospel, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and pronounced a blessing on Mary and the child she would bear (1:41-42). After Elizabeth's son John was born, his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied (1:67).

Jesus was not only conceived by the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit came upon him at his baptism (3:22). Then, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (4:1-2). After that wilderness testing, "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside" (4:14). When he came to his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me..." Then he said, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (4:14, 18, 21).

John the Baptizer had said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Lk 3:16). Just days before Pentecost, Jesus promised his disciples, "In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" and told them they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:5, 8).

So there are several ways to talk about experiencing the Holy Spirit. Baptized with the Spirit means we're immersed in and covered with God's presence. Filled with the Spirit means the Spirit of God enters us and puts the life of Christ in us, making us people in Christ and people in and through whom Christ lives. We receive the Spirit and this power when we put our faith in Jesus and receive him as our Savior and Lord. By receiving the Spirit, we're incorporated into the body of Christ. Then we're to continue being full of the Spirit.

Talking about being filled with or full of the Holy Spirit is an illustration that describes the fullness of relationship with God. God's presence and power are real and they really are in us when the Holy Spirit lives in us.

I've told you many times about how I invited Jesus to come into my heart when I was young. A couple of years after that, I learned about being filled with the Holy Spirit and my prayer then was, "Lord, fill me with your

Spirit.” Ideally, we experience all of that all at once. But if we’re not told about the Holy Spirit early on and later learn about God’s offer of God’s own Spirit filling us, we can experience these gifts at different times. Then we’re continually full of God’s Spirit. Also, there can be numerous times when the Spirit shows God’s love and power in special ways.

For me, praying to be filled with the Holy Spirit was surrendering to God, submitting to Jesus as Lord. It made me hungry to know the Scriptures. It moved me into sharing with others what God was doing. It eventually led me into ordained ministry.

I talk about that early experience, but it occurred to me the other day to wonder what it means to be full of the Holy Spirit now. How does God want to make known his presence, power, and love here and now? Surrender to God and accepting the Holy Spirit’s guidance and letting him be in charge doesn’t cancel out who I am or who you are. I’m learning more about life *with* God. It becomes more of a partnership—although the Lord remains the one in charge.

Trevor Hudson is a Methodist minister in South Africa. In his book *Holy Spirit, Here and Now*, he tells about growing up in a family where they didn’t pray or attend church. Then in tenth grade, Trevor met a new friend, Philip. As they got to know each other, he noticed something different about Philip. He had a real faith that he demonstrated in his living. Trevor asked Philip one day, “What makes your life different?” Philip told about his relationship with Jesus Christ. He talked about how Jesus died for our sin, was raised from the dead, and how his Spirit comes to live in us today. He told Trevor that if he wanted to experience God’s presence, he needed to turn toward Jesus and give his life to him.

Walking home late one night, Trevor looked up at the night sky and said something like, “Lord Jesus, thank you for everything you did for me. I give myself to you. I want to follow you for the rest of my life. Please come into my life and make me the person you want me to be.” The next evening he went to a Youth for Christ rally. The speaker invited those who wanted to follow Christ to come forward. Trevor wasn’t sure about his prayer the night before, so he walked down the aisle and knelt at the rail. His journey with Jesus into life with God had begun. He says, “Following that decision,

Jesus seemed to step out of the mists of history and into my life as my living friend and guide." He had a new awareness of God in his life as he prayed. He read the Bible with fresh eyes.

Some years later, he was serving an inner-city congregation in Johannesburg. This was during the days of apartheid in South Africa. He says he came to the end of his own resources. He was going through the motions of ministry, but was bedraggled in spirit, resentful toward people in need, and felt far from God. He even wrote out his resignation. He felt a terrible sadness and sense of failure.

But before he handed in his resignation, he got an invitation from a friend to attend a three-day retreat. Trevor went on the retreat. The opening talk was based on Ezekiel 37:14, where God says, "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live." The speaker told how God's Spirit breathes new life into barren lives. The message spoke to Trevor and became God's life-giving words to him.

The last night of the retreat, everyone was seated in a circle in the chapel. The speaker invited anyone who needed the ministry of the Holy Spirit to indicate their need. Trevor got out of his chair, knelt on the floor, and held out his open hands as a way of taking God's promise through Ezekiel seriously and asking God to make it come true in his life.

One of the others present walked over to Trevor, laid his hands on his head, and prayed for God to fill him up with the Holy Spirit from the tips of his toes to the top of his head. Nothing dramatic happened. He didn't feel anything physically. But after Trevor got up, he walked outside and found himself whispering to God over and over, "Abba Father, Abba Father, Abba Father." Looking back, he believes the wind of the Holy Spirit blew gently across his life, assuring him that God loved him.

When he got home from the retreat he decided not to say anything about his experience for at least a year. He just wanted to see what would happen. He started noticing significant changes within a few weeks. He led someone into a commitment to Jesus Christ for the first time in his life. He was finally delivered from a gambling addiction that had held him in its grip for many years. God was doing things in him that he hadn't been able to do in his own power. People who knew him well sensed something different in

his preaching and teaching. Trevor says he soon realized that this encounter with the Holy Spirit was simply another step in his journey with Christ (*Holy Spirit Here and Now* 30-33, 155-57).

A lot of us have experiences similar to that. Maybe you have or maybe you long for God to make himself real to you like that. Maybe you need to receive power to help you be more than you can be on your own, do more than you're able to do in your own strength. God makes the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit available and offers it to us. We can surrender and receive through faith.

The church is people. The church is people filled with the Holy Spirit. *The church is people who are Jesus' empowered witnesses.* In Acts 1:8, Jesus says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses...."

All through Luke's writings, when people are filled with the Holy Spirit, they speak. The 120 here in Acts 2 speak in languages they hadn't learned. Peter stood up and spoke to the crowd that gathered. Peter's Pentecost sermon is an example of the early Christian message, early Christian preaching. The basic content of that message is that a new era of God's work has dawned in Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection. Jesus is exalted to the place of highest honor. The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of God's glory. Jesus will return and fulfill all of God's promises and purposes. Therefore, repent—change your thinking about God and yourself, change your attitude toward God, turn and go in a new direction with God.

I read about two men who traveled to work together every day. From Monday through Friday they worked as colleagues in the same company. On the weekends they went their separate ways. On Sundays one would play golf and the other would go to church. One Monday as they drove to work, the golfer fired an unexpected question at his churchgoing friend: "When are you going to stop this hypocrisy of going to church each week?"

"What do you mean? I'm not a hypocrite. Sunday worship is very important to me."

"Well, if you believe that's true, then I'm missing out on a great deal," said the golfer, "yet you've never shared with me what Jesus means to you."

Now, it's hard to criticize the man who hesitated to share his faith. Maybe he didn't want to come across as pushy or arrogant or disrespectful. Still, it's a challenging story. How many people could confront us in a similar way? They may know faith is important to us, church is important to us, but do they wonder why we've never shared with them what Jesus means to us? (Hudson 109-10).

God doesn't fill us with the Holy Spirit just to make us feel better or to help us out a little bit. God fills us with the Holy Spirit to make us empowered witnesses of Jesus. That doesn't mean we have to be somebody we're not. We don't suddenly have to start shouting on street corners or making social situations strange or work settings awkward. But we're ready to answer people's questions when they ask us what's different about us. In the natural course of relationships with people, when the opportunity arises, we're ready to share what Jesus means to us.

Peter declared who Jesus is and what God was doing. About 3000 people accepted his message, were baptized, and became part of the church that day.

The church is people. The church is people filled with God's Spirit. The church is people who are empowered witnesses of Jesus. *The church is people in community that's created by the Holy Spirit.* That's what the last section of Acts 2 is about. I've preached about this several times. Right now, I'll just tell one story to illustrate it.

Last week, one of my college roommates posted a message about all the church folks who are trying to "fix" him. He admits being broken and is grateful for help. I sent him a message asking what's going on. He was injured in an accident last year and this led to not being able to work and losing income. His wife got ill. The bottom line is they're struggling a lot. The church they attend has a hard time with that. In some places, there's an idea that Christians are supposed to be healed and successful and victorious all the time. In that setting they often have trouble dealing with Christians who suffer.

As I read that, I thought, "I'm glad our church isn't like that." We're not, are we? But what do hurting people perceive that we think about them? I think we do a good job of standing with each other, caring for each

other, praying for each other. We could probably learn something from some other churches about God's miraculous healing power. But we stick with each other no matter what.

Anyway, my roommate shared with me some of the stuff he's going through and how some church folks have been treating him. I tried to give some encouragement and said I'd pray for at least one person to stand with him, be with him, and support him. Within two hours, he sent me this message: "God sent us a woman today. Thanks for asking on my behalf. Hope renewed. Message that healed and restored. I can see again." He went on to tell me about the affirmation and encouragement this woman gave him and his wife.

The Holy Spirit creates community and helps us care for each other. That's a big part of being the church God wants us to be. The church is people, filled with the Holy Spirit, empowered as witnesses of Jesus, caring for each other in community, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That's who we're meant to be and that's what we celebrate on this Pentecost Day.