

Flowing in the Spirit's Power

Acts 2:1-21

Ezekiel 43:1-5, 47:1-9

John 7:37-38

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Pentecost Sunday

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“O God who sanctifies your prayers for illumination – Universal Church in every race and nation: Send abroad throughout the world the gift of the Holy Spirit, that the work done by the Spirit’s power at the first preaching of the Gospel may now be experienced here, and spread worldwide among all believing hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ezekiel is probably the weirdest prophet to understand. He writes the vision God gives him using dramatic symbolic imagery. He portrays the downfall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the departure of God from that ancient holy place, and the exile of the God’s people of Israel into Babylon for 70 years. God leaves them. Then, turning the page, Ezekiel describes the return and restoration of Israel, back to Jerusalem, back to the temple, and most of all, the glory of God by the power of God’s Spirit returning and filling that ancient place anew with joy and gladness.

On this Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the great coming of God’s Holy Spirit again to Jerusalem, 50 days after Jesus’ resurrection, filling despairing, dispirited disciples with joy and gladness, power and peace, and assurance of God’s presence with them then and there, and God’s leading them into a bright and glorious future. More than remembering that Pentecost day, we experience God’s Spirit here with us today giving us power and purpose, unity and common commitment. Pentecost marks the birth of the Church, but also the ongoing life of the church.

On this day we claim anew this spiritual presence and power to renew and reshape our lives, our church, and through the witness of God’s people, the world God came in love to save. The power of Pentecost is manifested in natural phenomena of wind and fire, transforming these frightened fledglings into bold audacious believers, apostles, who as the word indicates, carry forth the good news of the Gospel so that it penetrates and transforms the known world all the way from Africa and India to Rome.

Ezekiel, 600 years before Christ, then later Luke in Acts, 30 years after Christ, call us, as scripture does again and again, to turn away from our sin, repent, and turn to the Lord. The Spirit is at work in all of this. As Ezekiel writes,

“O house of Israel, ... cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.”ⁱ

In the first part of Ezekiel, the prophet depicts Israel’s unfaithfulness.

“Your prophets have been like jackals among the ruins, O Israel. You have not gone up into the breaches, or repaired a wall for the house of Israel, so that it might stand in battle on the day of the Lord. They have envisioned falsehood and lying...Therefore thus says the Lord God; Because you have uttered falsehood and envisioned lies, I am against you.”ⁱⁱ

Tragically we see the glory of God leaving the holy temple, departing, absenting himself from that sacred space. “Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house.”

It is sad to see an abandoned church- you see them along the back roads of Alabama, boarded up, rotting. You see them in urban centers, places built for worship of the living God, now turned into bars and restaurants and apartment houses, churches right here in Birmingham being sold off for housing developments and shopping centers. It is sad.

But of course, the Lord God is found among his people, not their real estate. As Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville accurately says on their sign out front, “Westminster Presbyterian Church Meets Here.” And I love how Rev. Jim Truesdell used to answer visitors to our building who would ooh and aah over the beauty of this structure, and it is rightly beautiful, stately, solid. Although needing some attention! Every week I see wedding parties and graduates taking their photos on our front steps- whether their services will be here or not. As Dr. Dana Water used to say, “We practice architectural evangelism.” I remember the young college age church group from Auburn who met here for a while, and their being breath-struck over the beauty of this place. Well Rev. Jim Truesdell used to say in response, “Yes this church is beautiful, and the building is not bad either.”

At Pentecost we experience the beauty of God’s Spirit descending on the believers in a house in Jerusalem and filling it with glory and power, fire, and wind, God is present there, then flows out into the streets so that Jews come to the Pentecost Festival experience the Lord. The account continues following Peter’s 1st sermon, “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We see the power of God manifest in the waters of baptism, and as Ezekiel is shown, water flowing from the temple. Water, that most essential necessity of life. Ezekiel portrays the return of God’s Spirit in terms of water which gives life, “The glory of the God of Israel was coming from the East; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters; and the Earth shone with his glory.” water flowing down from the temple all the way out to the salt filled lifeless Dead Sea. Miraculously - as the water of God’s Spirit flows from the temple it deepens and widens from ankle deep, to knee deep, to waist deep, and finally to a mighty river deep enough to swim in, and wide. And this, this, this,

“Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes.”^{iv}

Ezekiel continues,

“People will stand fishing beside the (Dead) sea. Its fish will be of a great many kinds... On the banks, on both sides of the river there will grow all kinds of trees for food, they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

It is the same sort of image Jesus expresses that day when he stands boldly on the temple steps on the last day of the great Jewish festival which celebrated the water coming forth from the rock in the wilderness as Moses, at God’s command, struck the rock and life-giving water flowed forth. According to Jewish tradition, for seven days water was carried in a golden pitcher from the Pool of Siloam to the temple, as a reminder of the water from the rock in the desert, and as a symbol of hope for the coming Messianic deliverance.^v Now Jesus, who is the true Messiah, the true water, turns symbol into reality as he declares,

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”^{vi}

Now that Jesus has been resurrected and glorified the Spirit comes at Pentecost, transforms the believers, and gives birth to the church. Waters of life flow again from the temple, and from the church, this church, South Highland. There is life here, full, fresh, and free, and available to you. What’s the secret? Really simply an open secret- that God is, “I am that I am”, that God loves, “God so loved the world that he gave his only son”, that God saves and promises, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away.”^{vii}

The secret my friends is this: live your life daily in the power of the Spirit. Open yourself afresh daily to God’s presence and power. God can meet you here today with life transforming fresh waters of life. It begins from above, God sending his Spirit. It flows through the temple, the church, flawed as she is, still the agent for bringing forth the Good News. And this water is something that does not merely trickles -, it flows, it gushes, it deepens, it widens, so that you can swim in it.

Then this water reaches you!

As you reflect on your life, I ask you, is your spiritual life a deepening experience. Are you experiencing more of the power and presence of God today than you did in your childhood or youth? Have you grown? Are you growing? It is not a matter of mastering technique. It is a matter of making connection, opening yourself, longing for God to come and fill you. Praying “Come Holy Spirit – fill the hearts of your people.” As the hymn by John Newton says,

“See the streams of living waters, Springing from eternal love,

Well supply thy sons and daughters And all fear of want remove.
 Who can faint while such a river Ever flows their thirst to assuage?
 Grace, which like the Lord the giver, Never fails from age to age.”^{viii}

Simply put- my friends God if willing of you are. God promises his Spirit is with you here now always, if you will open your heart of hearts and let him fill you. The secret? Keep in the fellowship of Jesus. Keep building your life around the manger, the cross and the empty tomb.

I was privileged recently to spend ten days in two very different parts of the world – and experience the church and the power of the Spirit in each! The Middle East and Central Europe, Lebanon and Poland. I went to Lebanon on behalf of the Outreach Foundation of the Presbyterian Church to engage, (along with Reformed partner churches from Ireland, France, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Hungary, our own PCUSA European and Middle East representatives, and others), in conversations with the Presbyterian Churches in Syria and Lebanon who have suffered so greatly in recent years. I was privileged to preach at the Tuesday morning worship. Their lives have been marked by terrorist explosions of their churches, a tyrannical dictator in Syria, civil wars with Islamic radicals – forcing one third – 7million of the population of Syria to become refugees leaving their homes and villages and for some their country. Then economic collapse in Lebanon and an intense explosion in a warehouse in downtown Beirut, and on top of it all most recently, two immense earthquakes. Still the Presbyterian Church Synod of Syria and Lebanon survives. They are suffering but they endure. They are bearing witness.

Two stories from two countries. After the conference we traveled in Lebanon first to the north then to the south. At each stop we met incredible committed Christians, witnessing to the love of God in Jesus amid a Muslim majority. We visited refugee schools where displaced Syrian children are being loved, cared for, fed and educated. We visited the church’s own Christian Schools, viewed as the very best schools in Lebanon. These students are generally 95% Muslim. There are few conversions, but immense Gospel power at work, as these Presbyterian schools are the favorites of Lebanese parents who want the best education for their children, grow to be peaceful productive educated, godly adults. They become the leaders in government, education and healthcare.

We also visited churches. In one village in the south, from which we could see the Golan Heights and beyond that, the nation of Israel, we met a wonderful pastor who has been serving this little border town church for 39 years, after growing up there where his father was the pastor before him. Despite war with Israel, civil war in Lebanon with Hezbollah, being forced several times to flee as a refugee from his own village, still, after 39 years, he perseveres. Still the witness of the church continues.

Then we visited a health clinic in nearby even smaller village, and met the amazing Dr. Assad. This man is remarkable. He is a renowned Gastroenterologist who works in the American University Hospital in Beirut Wednesday through Saturday, and runs the health clinic in his little village in the south Monday and Tuesday where they see 400 to 500 people a

month. On top of that, he serves as the lay pastor of the little church where he preaches and leads worship each Sunday. I asked him, “When do you ever rest?” He replied, “Oh I have all Sunday afternoon.

He told us of a Shiite Muslim restaurant owner who brought in his wife for emergency surgery which Dr. Assad performed, saving her life. Seeing her good recovery, this man asked the doctor to look at a skin disease he suffered from. Dr. Assad was able to cure that. The man testified to him, “I am a Muslim. But I now know who Jesus Christ is through you.” The power of the Spirit my friends is at work!

Then briefly a story about Poland. I was the guest of a small Christian college called “The Warsaw School of Theology and Social Sciences.” They train primarily pastors and counselors. Dr. Larry Michael visited there last year, taught them online courses about counseling people in grief, and last year was the colleges graduation speaker. I was so inspired by the faith of the students I met, as I taught the English-speaking class that studies world cultures. These students came from more than ten countries on four different continents, from Africa to South America, including Kenya, Congo, Mexico, Slovakia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Argentina, Rwanda and of course Poland. The joy and hope and faithful trust of these students was palpable. They are studying hard and preparing to serve in the power of the Spirit. It was Pentecost all over again!

Friends, “Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live.” Today, Pentecost Sunday, I call you to live in the flow of the Spirit. I remind you, God’s Spirit is alive and at work, flowing down from above, out from the threshold of the temple, the church, then growing to a mighty life-giving, healing River, bringing life, fruit, healing, to places of death. May this Living Lord flow into and through you with life that we together may be life-givers.

Let us pray.

“As the wind is thy symbol, So forward our goings.
As the dove, So launch us heavenwards.
As water, So purify our spirits.
As a cloud, So abate our temptations.
As dew, So revive our languor.
As fire, So purge out our dross.”^{ix}

Amen.

ⁱ Ez. 18:31-32

ⁱⁱ Ez. 13:4-58

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 2

^{iv} Ez. 47:9

^v Num. 20:2-13, Is. 12:3

^{vi} Jn. 7:37-39

^{vii} Acts 2:38-39

^{viii} The Presbyterian Hymnal, "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," -p.446

^{ix} "To the Holy Spirit," Christian Rosetti