

Let's Get Started – Go in the Spirit
Pastor Jim Cords
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This Sunday's texts:

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

John 14:23-31

The holy gospel for this Pentecost Sunday comes to us from the Gospel of John, the fourteenth chapter:

Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me. Come now; let us leave."

The gospel of the Lord. Heavenly Father, as we worship this day, move in our hearts and lives and ministry by your Holy Spirit that we might indeed be empowered to believe and to bear witness to the truth of your Son. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So as I was preparing for this Pentecost Sunday sermon, I came across these words in my Bible study fact book and I thought they were so profound I wanted to just read them to you. "The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is one of the gifts of salvation by which God's very presence, in the person of the Spirit, indwells the church corporately and Christians individually, drawing them into the life of the Triune God."¹ A part of what God does in the world for his people is he draws us into his very life as he indwells our lives. That's a part of what we celebrate on this birthday of the church.

So I found it a bit odd and kind of intriguing that the first lesson for today comes to us as the story of the Tower of Babel. Now I'm sure you heard this story in Sunday School and maybe you've even studied it, but I find it a bit off-putting. We hear from God himself that if the people can communicate, that is, if they continue to have one language, they will be able to do *anything*. I'm thinking to myself sounds like a deal! As matter of fact, I'm thinking to myself that's exactly how God created us. One language, one people. You know. Adam and Eve extended out. It just sounds like a good deal. So what's the problem? Well, the problem is, stated in verse four, that says "'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, [get this] so that we may make a name for ourselves,"² and then they say this, "otherwise [that is, if we don't make a name for ourselves] we will be scattered."³ So what we discover in the story is they're not thinking right. Their motives are selfish. We want to take this

¹ Lexham Survey of Theology

² Genesis 11:4a

³ Genesis 11:4b

ability to work together so that we can be glorified, so that we can make a name for ourselves and they think that if they do that, they can avoid being scattered. So what happens? God confuses their language and scatters them because they do that, because of their self-seeking. As we were reading through Kings and part of Chronicles, you may have heard repeated the words “and everyone did what they thought was right in their own eyes.”⁴ The problem isn't our lack of ability. The problem is that we forget that we were created for a higher purpose and when we instead get sidetracked, when we instead get derailed by seeking purposes of our own, and then we bring problems, not only on ourselves, but into our world. For we hear in Christ, we learn in Jesus that the glory is in service. The elevation of our lives comes in humbleness and in love and concern for others, not in concern for ourselves.

The biblical description of salvation. We just sang that beautiful song “I Can Only Imagine” and I can only imagine thinking about what it's going to be like when we enter into the presence of God. Are we going to sing or are we going to just fall down in silence? But the biblical description of salvation can be summarized as union or re-union with God. It is the process by which we are redeemed and rescued out of our selfishness, out of our separation, that God invites us back into the design-relationship that Creator and creature are intended to have. Our salvation is about the redemption of that restored relationship. So this promise of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is a culmination of God renewing his relationship with us as he dwells in us and as he makes himself known to the world through us.

So a part of that higher calling we hear after Jesus' death and resurrection, as he gives the church the Great Commission – “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I command you. Remember that I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”⁵ Go! And we say I'm not sure I'm equipped. I'm not sure I'll know what to do. I'm afraid I'm going to offend people. I'm afraid if I am your witness, God, then you're going to be worse off than if I just say nothing at all, so I'm just going to be quiet. And what we forget, as we hear this Great Commission and especially as we pastors upfront keep saying it over and over and over again to remind you that the purpose of the church is to do this Great Commission, what we forget is Jesus also said *wait*. Essentially what Jesus said is go, but not yet. I understand you can't do it. I understand that you're not able to fulfill the Commission that I've given you, that is, until the Holy Spirit comes. So wait until the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon you, *then* go and be my witness, not in your strength, but in the indwelling presence and strength of God at work in and through us as his church.

We hear this story in the Acts' Pentecost scene that it begins with this great wind. We're reminded that in both Greek and Hebrew the word for “wind” is the same as the word for “breath” is the same as the word for “spirit.” So when we hear about the breath of God, when we hear about wind, we think about the very presence of God himself. God is showing up. And then the wind transforms in the story and all of a sudden we begin to hear about tongues of fire. Well, that's a little more obscure. So we think back. Where does the presence of God show up in flames? We hear it maybe first in the burning bush, a bush that burns but it is not consumed, where God comes to Moses or Moses comes to God and God says I'm going to use

⁴ Example: Judges 21:25

⁵ Matthew 28:19

you to set my people free. We go through the whole Exodus story and the movement out into the wilderness and again, we see the presence of God for his people shows up in a pillar of fire that demonstrates for the people that they are not alone. I am with you. A cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Then we hear of God's presence in the temple being represented by that flame. And now here in the Pentecost story, we see the flame, but the flame is present on each of them, marking an incredible transition between God's presence in the temple and God's presence in each one of his people, so that we carry that presence into our lives wherever we go and with whomever we meet.

We carry the very presence of God. And what is that presence? That is, what does that presence do? What does the Holy Spirit do, as we read about this in this Pentecost story? When Jesus said wait, he says when you will be clothed with power from on high. It's not about our power. It's about God's power at work within us.

Throughout this Easter season, we've been talking about the kingdom of God and we've been talking about the power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power at work in us. We have that authority given to us to do the work of God in the world. Now, as we celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church, for the next several weeks we're going to be on a series on the church. What are we? And what are we called to be and do? How do we recognize what we're all about? Jesus says, in verse 23 of John 14, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." - the abiding presence of God.

In January, we began a journey as a church, reading through the scripture. I've invited and encouraged you to be in the Bible daily, reading through the scripture, to hear that voice and power of God, so that we can know and recognize his voice in our lives because too often we're confused by what we want to do over against by what God wants to do through us. Too often we are deceived by our own desires, rather than led by the power of the spirit.

In that confusion, in that fear, we also hear Jesus proclaim these words "Peace I leave with you. Not as the world. My peace I give to you." He says "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."⁶ Every once in a while, I say to the leadership council it is not appropriate for us to make decisions based on fear. Well, what if this happens? What if this happens? But what if that happens? What do we think God wants us to do? What do we think the right thing is to do? Let's go do that. If we fail, we fail. We'll pick ourselves up and start again. We'll admit our mistakes and we'll move on, but let's not do, that is let's not not do what we're called to do because somehow we're fearful that somebody won't like it, or someone won't support it, or whatever else comes into our minds. I'm talking about the corporate church, but I'm also talking about you. I'm talking about those times in your life when you might sense God is calling you to do something, but you think yeah, but what if. Maybe I don't know if I'll find the words. Maybe I'll offend somebody. Maybe I'm just not the right example. But God says you *are* and you *will* be my witnesses.

And then listen to this. "The Advocate, that is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things." And then get this, "and will remind you of everything I have said to you."⁷ A part of the reason I want us, as the people of God, to be in the word of

⁶ John 14:27

⁷ John 14:26

God is because the Holy Spirit can't remind us of something we haven't already heard. To be reminded suggests something we already knew once and now we're just being reminded. So as we spend time in the word, we empower the Holy Spirit. We empower the Holy Spirit to empower us with the word of God, so that we know how to respond to the various situations in our life, what to say, and what to do, as we seek to demonstrate the love and goodness of God. That we're so hesitant to do except when the Holy Spirit empowers, invites us, and gives us words and actions.

We have to be reminded of what Jesus said. As I think about that witness, I've reminded my son Paul just got back from a mission trip to Africa. When he got there, they got there late, late Saturday night, more like early Sunday morning. So only about half the team got up the next morning and went to church because they literally had just gone to bed. Paul goes to church that next morning and he meets the members of this church, including Solomon. Solomon is not on the team. He's just a member of the church. Solomon happens to be a professional runner. He runs the same race that Paul ran when he was in high school and they have a mutual friend in Bernard Lagat. So they started talking and chatting and Solomon decided that he was going to help them out with their mission. So Solomon became Paul's interpreter for the rest of the week. He went wherever they went and he was Paul's interpreter. Now when Paul's going, he's thinking to himself I got a problem with interpreters. I need to make sure that when I give an instruction, the interpreter gives the instruction that I'm giving. Because sometimes interpreters like to kind of say what they want to say. When you're trying to show people how to do an exercise and how to do right and all that stuff, you need them to use the right words. Paul very quickly discovers that Solomon is not using the same words that Paul is using, meaning he's not saying the exact thing that Paul is saying in Swahili. He discovered that very quickly. A couple of days in, though, what he discovers is Solomon's better at it than Paul is. That is, Solomon understands what Paul is trying to say and understands what words to use to actually communicate that intent in Swahili. And so Paul relaxes because he realizes that he has this interpreter who's going to make the words right for the person he's trying to help.

I think to myself, Church, we have this promised Holy Spirit who's going to empower us to communicate the good news of the Gospel to the people in our lives. It's sort of what I say to some people when they say after my sermons, "Oh good sermon, Pastor. I really like the sermon today." I think of myself it's really cool what God does between my mouth and your ears. That is, God is able to take the gobbledygook that comes out of my mouth and what goes into your ears serves the gospel. I trust that the power of God will use whatever God gives me, in your heart, in your ears, to empower you to live out your faith in a more profound way, so that God is able to work in and through you. We study the words of the scripture, so that the Holy Spirit can remind us and use us to be a witness for Christ in the world. To use the words of Acts 2, to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world. By the way, the uttermost parts of the world, they're all here in San Jose. They're all around us. We have this incredible privilege to be the church in this vast mix of humanity. We have opportunities every day to demonstrate God's love to those who may have not yet heard it. We're told in Pentecost, that each one of them was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit enabled them. The Holy Spirit enables you to be the person God needs you to be to the people God is sending you to.

He enables us as a church to be a community that demonstrates that. I'll tell you. In the last couple of years, one of the things I've been really concerned about is I think we just need more time to hang out. We just need more time to be together, to be the people of God, to be the family of God, and to be mutually encouraged by one another. So I'm excited about this 26th event (the 60th anniversary celebration). We can just hang out a bit, eat some food, drink some drink and we're hanging out and we're being the people of God. Do you know what else we're doing? We're inviting everyone who comes to VBS to also come and hang out with us. So that as we just are the people of God together, we demonstrate what the presence of God does in fellowship and in community.

This is, of course, in addition to being sent out into the world. Listen to this these words, what the Holy Spirit empowers. “[W]e hear them declaring the wonders of God.”⁸ People don't recognize the wonders of God. They don't necessarily understand that mercy is not getting what you deserve and grace is getting what you don't deserve. Mercy is being spared for the punishment that we deserve for the wrong we have done and grace is receiving the goodness of God that we don't deserve but He chooses to give us. And the people around us in the world don't know if we don't share the brilliance of that promise from the Living God. We are the empowered church. The spirit of God goes with us, so that wherever we go God goes. Wherever we are, the Holy Spirit is there, to enable us to be the witness he needs us to be. The presence and power of God are present both with us and in us and through us. So now, we are called to go in and with the spirit. Now when I first read that as a part of our “Know the Father, grow in the Son, and go with the Spirit,” I kind of thought that I was supposed to do something. That is, I didn't realize that the going with the Spirit just means going. Because I got news for you, Church. You can't go without the Spirit. He is already in you and with you. Now you can go without recognizing it. You can go without grasping it. Or you can go believing in and claiming the promise, so that as you trust in God, you don't have to be afraid. You can be the hands and feet of God to the world where he sends you, to be his witness because we are the church. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Acts 2:11