

June 4, 2017
The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Us
Acts 2:1-13

Today is what we sometimes call "Pentecost." Acts 2:1 literally reads "*And on the arriving of the fiftieth day ...*" (after Jesus' resurrection, Easter Sunday). The Greek word for "fiftieth" is "*pentecosté*" – often translators leave the Greek word "pentecost" there as though it were some sort of title. Luke, the author, is simply recording the events of Day 50 after Easter. Church tradition has given it the impressive label, "Pentecost."

What is happening? What is there to tell? Why all the bother? There is a sudden sound from heaven, a violent wind, tongues of fire, words spoken in different languages, bewilderment, amazement, and the sarcastic remark, "*They have had too much wine.*" That's exciting. But those signs and wonders are not actually what this story is about. What this story is all about is God completing what He began at creation, what He continued through Jesus, and what He now brings to fulfillment as the Holy Spirit.

What Day 50 means #1 – God-within-us

Throughout the Old Testament, God – God Almighty, Creator, King, Father – is revealed as God-for-us, creating, providing, and sustaining a glorious world, guiding His people out slavery, delivering them from exile, caring for them as a wise, benevolent Father.

Later, in Jesus, God is revealed as God-with-us, walking with us, dying for us, rising victorious over death, and ascending to His Father. Now, on day 50 after Jesus' ultimate victory – resurrection – God reveals Himself as God-within-us. God comes into our lives in a very intimate, personal way. He invites us into His life in an intimate, personal, way, too.

God ***is*** God-for-us; God ***is*** God-with-us; He ***is also*** God-within-us. God is no longer (at best) a pillar of fire by night and pillar of cloud by day, an almighty, unknowable, outsider. He is no longer just an historical person, Jesus. God is Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Jesus who lives within His people and fills us with new hope, courage, and confidence. The Spirit allows us to say, with confidence, "*Jesus is Lord!*" (1 Corinthians 12:3), gives us words to speak in times of trial (Luke 12:12), provides wisdom (Acts 6:10), guides our decisions (Acts 15:18), empowers us to forgive others as Jesus did (John 20:23), gives us the opportunity to live and share the good news of God's love and mercy (Mark 16:20).

Jesus tells us:

- "*the Holy Spirit will teach you all things*" (John 14:26)
- "*the Spirit of truth, will guide you into all the truth*" (or "*the complete truth*") (John 16:13)

The time of confusion, misunderstanding, unknowing, and fear is over.

The specific signs and wonders of Day 50 never happen like this again – the initial coming of the Spirit is a one-time thing. But the effect of Day 50 – the inner presence of God-within-us come amongst us – never ends. Life in the Spirit is a life of hope, courage, power, wisdom, strength, and, most of all, love – God’s unconditional, undeserved, unending love.

What Day 50 means #2 – A New Community of Faith

God-within-us, the Spirit within us, the Spirit of the God of love, the Spirit of the living Jesus, is the Holy Spirit who creates a new community among those who believe. *"We live in a time of great loneliness,"* writes Henri Nouwen, *"and we think of community as a place where we can be vulnerable, where we can reveal ourselves fully, come to know others deeply and develop lasting, intimate relationships. How much do we long for such a community! It is an ideal, very alive in our dreams but very elusive in the daily reality of our lives."*

This is the type of community the Spirit builds. The New Testament calls it "church" – literally *"the called-out, called-together"* people of God (Greek *"ekklesia"*). The church is not called-out because we have shared interests, have common backgrounds, or are particularly good people. The community of the Spirit – the church – is built on the foundation of having received the same blessing of God’s love through Jesus, of experiencing the same in-breathing of the Spirit of the risen Lord, of having the same divine spark of new life kindled in our hearts and fanned into flame by the Spirit. Church – community – is a gift of the Spirit. It has everything to do with God and His grace, nothing to do with our preferences or prejudices. This is humbling. It’s also empowering: through dependence on God, a community/church will be built that no power can destroy.

Our challenge is to recognize we are **GOD’S** called-out, called-together people. We are **His** community. We are **His** church. We are called out by a common experience of **His** grace, mercy, and blessing. We are **His** church – we are one in **Him**. There is no place for our prejudices or preferences; they are not relevant. We need – we ALL need – to listen to the Spirit. We are His people. We need His wisdom. We need His power.

Think about who was there on that first 50th day: Peter (a hot-headed fisherman), Matthew (a forgiven tax-collector), Luke (a compassionate, Greek physician), John (the one whom Jesus loved), Thomas (the doubter), James and John ("the sons of thunder") ... These are all very different people from very different backgrounds. They are not together because they are "compatible" or work well together. They do not agree on every theological issue. They are together because the Spirit calls them out together. They have a common experience of God’s love and His Spirit. And they have a common task, to take that love into the world. Together, through the Spirit, they will change the world.

The church is unity in diversity. Like those first disciples, we all have a unique experience of life and of Jesus – and a common experience of life and of Jesus. We come together, as they did, to form one body – made up of many, many very different parts (see 1

Corinthians 12:12-30). But called out together by Spirit, filled with the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, we are His people – His church – called out to be God’s love in the world ...

Someone has likened the church to a symphony orchestra. There are many, very different instruments. Separately they may or may not sound very good. None can play an entire orchestral piece. Going it alone is not a great option for the average instrumentalist. The strength of the orchestra is its diversity. An orchestra that is all oboes (with all due respect to oboists everywhere) would not be great. But together, under the direction of a master conductor, they can learn to play together to create a masterpiece that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

Our conductor is God, through His Spirit. Imagen what He can do in and through us ...

What Day 50 means #3 – A mission of Love and Hope ...

The community of faith – the church – drawn together by the Spirit is not created simply for the well-being of its members, but to change the world, to bring God’s love to the world, to set people free. The Spirit calls us together as one body, ***then sends us out into the world so ALL people can share*** in the mercy of God, the love of God, the forgiveness of God, the hope of God, the new life in God that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the new presence of God-within-us – the Spirit Himself, and the new community of God – the church.

Day 50 – Pentecost – is not the end of anything. It is the beginning of a mission to go out into world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all the commands of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus calls us out together in the light of His love, then sends us out as lamps into darkness, as salt into a bland, rotting, dying world.

We live in a world that needs Jesus! We need His hope. We need His mercy. We need His forgiveness. We need His wisdom. We need His love. We need His freedom.

Martin Luther King Jr famously presented his dream for the United States: *"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' ... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."*

Jesus gives us a greater dream: a dream where individual and social sin is destroyed. Where we all love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Where we all love our neighbour as ourselves. Where we all love one another as Jesus has loved us.

That is who we are called to be. That is our new hope. That is our new life. That is our new message. This is what Day 50 – Pentecost – is all about.

But has anything changed? Really?

Isn't the world just as dark and scary as it was back then? Yes ... and no. Yes, the world is still a dark and scary place. But we don't live in it as people in the past did – knowing about God, knowing God-for-us but having Him seem distant. We don't know God only through pages on a book or stories passed on from one generation to another.

We know God – God-for-us (the Father), God-with-us (Jesus) **and** God-within-us (the Spirit). That changes everything. In this dark and scary world, we are never alone – God Himself is within us. He gives us wisdom. He gives us strength. He gives us peace. He gives us joy. He guides us. Nothing and no one can take us from His hand (Romans 8).

We are blessed with genuine, authentic community – the called-out, called-together people of God – the church. The church, at its best, is a place where we can be vulnerable, where we can reveal ourselves fully, come to know others deeply and develop lasting, intimate relationships. We can love one another as very different people, celebrating our differences in the unity – the oneness – of the Spirit.

We have a fantastic calling: to share the good news and experience of new hope through the Father, new peace through Jesus, and new life in the Spirit. We make the world a *less* dark and *less* scary place through the wisdom, power, and strength of the Spirit.

Martin Luther King Jr. ends with a call to *"let freedom ring."* *"And when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"*

He is talking about racial and personal equality – which is great. But we know that is only one part of a larger story. We need a more transforming freedom that only comes through God-within-us, the Holy Spirit. When Jesus began His ministry, He quoted Isaiah 61:1-2: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"* (Luke 4:18-19).

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on us, because **He** has anointed us to proclaim good news to the poor. **He** has sent us to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* The Spirit of the Lord is on us, in us. Let's live in that freedom. And let's let freedom – freedom that comes through the Father, Son, and Spirit – ring out through us!