



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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There Came from Heaven

Acts 2:1-11

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American mega-church pastor Andy Stanley sparked a pretty big controversy this past week, by preaching a sermon in which his main point was a call for the church to, as he put it, “unhitch” itself from the Old Testament. God’s new covenant, he said, can stand on its own two nail-scarred feet. What he was arguing for was a contemporised form of Marcionism—one of the first major heresies that confronted the early Church. Marcion didn’t like the Old Testament, he didn’t like Jews, and he didn’t like the God of the Old Testament, so he threw it all away. Stanley made some different points than Marcion, but the practical result—ditching the Old Testament—was pretty much the same and his reason for it wasn’t much different than Marcion’s: people don’t like the Old Testament, it makes them uncomfortable, it scares people away from Christianity, so we need to unhitch ourselves from it and just preach Jesus starting with Jesus. Stanley isn’t the first preacher of our day to say this sort of thing. It’s a growing trend and, in every case I can think of, it’s been the first step towards justifying an embrace of contemporary sexual ethics and throwing out the Bible’s teaching on the subject.

I hope, if for no other reason than what we’ve seen in our study of Romans, that this idea that we can divorce ourselves from the Old Testament is simply and profoundly wrong. As Paul shouts from the rooftops: the good news about Jesus reveals the righteousness of God. What he means by that is that Jesus fulfils God’s promises and shows us

that God is faithful to do what he says he will do. He is faithful to his covenant. But we can’t know that unless we know those promises, unless we know and understand the Old Testament law and prophets. The Old Testament tells us who Jesus is and, without it, we can never fully know him. I think of my thesis advisor in graduate school, Bruce Waltke. While he was working on a doctorate in New Testament he realised that he could never fully understand the New Testament without really understanding the Old, so when he finished his first doctorate, he went on for a second in Old Testament. Jesus is there throughout. He can, indeed, stand on his own two nail-scarred feet, but you might say that one of those feet is the Old Testament.

The same goes for Pentecost. It’s part of the New Testament story, but we can’t really understand it unless we know how the story got there. Pentecost is a major Christian holy day, but it was a major Jewish holy day long before Jesus and long before the Holy Spirit was given to the Church. The word Pentecost simply means “fiftieth” in Greek. In Hebrew it was known as the Feast of Weeks, but it was commonly called Pentecost because it fell fifty days after Passover. But for Israel Pentecost was significant in two ways that are essential to understanding the big story into which Jesus stepped.

For the Jews Pentecost was a harvest festival. It stood at the beginning of the harvest season. God instructed his people to bring him the firstfruits—the very first part of the harvest, as an offering. That offering of the firstfruits—just like our tithes and offerings today—given before the full harvest had arrived, was an offering of faith. Other peoples would offer their gods what was left over *after* the harvest was brought in and they knew what they could afford to give, but God expected his people to give in faith, not knowing what the harvest would bring, but trusting that God would take care of them no matter

what happened, just as he had in the wilderness. It was a feast of expectation and faith. That was the first aspect of Pentecost.

The second has to do with the giving of the law. That’s where the significance of “fifty” comes in. Again, Pentecost follows fifty days after Passover. Now, first, Passover. Passover commemorated the events of the Exodus. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. The Lord sent Moses to deliver them, but Pharaoh refused to let them go. The Lord sent nine plagues on the Egyptians, but still Pharaoh would not free the Israelites. And so the Lord sent a final, tenth plague. The angel of death passed through Egypt and the firstborn son of every family died, from the royal palace to the lowliest slave hovel. But Israel was spared. Through Moses the Lord gave instructions that each family was to sacrifice a lamb and paint its blood on the doorposts of their house. When the angel of death saw the blood of the lamb, he would literally *pass over* that house and spare the life of the firstborn son within. The next morning, defeated by the Lord, Pharaoh finally set the Israelites free. In one last effort to bring them back he sent his army after them and cornered them at the Red Sea, but the Lord parted the waters and gave his people a safe escape into the wilderness.

These were the events commemorated by the Jews when they celebrated Passover. It was a festival of the Lord’s deliverance of his people and it celebrated the great event in which Israel was born as a nation.

But the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea wasn’t the end of the story. The Lord led his people into the wilderness and *fifty* days later they arrived at Mt. Sinai. Moses went up onto the mountain to meet with the Lord and when he came back down he was carrying the law, carved on stone tablets. So at Passover the people celebrated their redemption and at Pentecost they remembered that God

had redeemed them for a reason: to live a new kind of life in order to fulfil his purposes.

This is the backstory for what we read in the book of Acts. Can you see the parallels? Our celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus each year is the Christian Passover. As Israel was redeemed from slavery by the blood of the Passover lambs painted on their doors, so we are saved from our bondage to sin and our slavery to death by the blood of Jesus, the true, perfect, and eternal Passover lamb who not only died, but rose from the grave. That's *our* Passover; that's *our* exodus.

And now, fifty days later, we celebrate our Pentecost. Look at Acts 2:1-4 where St. Luke describes that first "Christian Pentecost":

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Something new and something big was happening. When Moses went up onto Mt. Sinai the people were afraid because of the thunder and lightning surrounding it. Now like wind and fire the Spirit rushes into the house where the disciples were gathered—probably the same upper room where they had celebrated the Passover with Jesus. And as the Spirit comes they all start to speak in different tongues, in different languages as the Spirit directed. We'll come back to that part as we look at the rest of the story in Acts 2, but for now notice the parallels with the "original" Old Testament Pentecost.

What we read here is the birthday, the start of the Church. What we see here is the firstfruits of Jesus' ministry. Consider the Ascension Day Epistle and Gospel where we read about Jesus ascending to heaven. The night he was arrested Jesus told his disciples at some length that he was leaving soon, but that it was for the best. He would leave, but in doing so he would send them his Spirit to equip them for ministry. As he was leaving he commissioned them: Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them and teaching them everything I've taught you. And as they stood there staring into space two angels appeared and asked, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring into the sky. Jesus left on the clouds and he will come back on the clouds one day. In the meantime, didn't he give you something to do?" Jesus commissioned his people to engage in a ministry of gigantic and intimidating proportions: to make him known throughout the world—to proclaim like royal heralds that Jesus is Lord, that he is God's King, and that his kingdom is being established. It's a call of repentance to the world: Stop following all of your false lords and false gods. Stop trusting in your wealth or your power or your prestige and instead trust in Jesus.

To take that message to the world was—and still is—a daunting task. Jesus was sending his friends out to challenge the world and to challenge all those who were in authority. To go first to Jerusalem and Judea and to proclaim this good news about Jesus to the very people who had just crucified him. And then to take it to the nations, not least Caesar himself. It wasn't just that the harvest went on further than the eye could see, but that going out into the harvest meant rejection, persecution, and even death. Jesus gave an impossible task. But here at Pentecost he sends the Holy Spirit to equip his friends for their impossible mission and not only that but here we see the firstfruits of the harvest and we know that what God

has begun he will always finish—even if it takes a long time.

In verses 5-11 Luke goes on, saying:

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

These were all Jews or converts to Judaism, but they represented every corner of the known world. Looking out on the field of the world the harvest looked overwhelming, but now we see the Spirit equipping these men who, themselves, came from every corner of the world and if the Spirit could equip them to proclaim the mighty works of God he could certainly send them out and then gather more to send out to follow them.

When we look at Pentecost in the context of the larger story of redemption it really is remarkable. Back at the beginning the Lord had chosen and called Abraham. In Genesis 12:3 we read the Lord's promise to Abraham: Through you and through your family all the nations of the world will be blessed. This was Abraham's mission and then it became Israel's mission. And Israel was generally a miserable failure at fulfilling that mission. More often than not the nations were laughing at

Israel and asking, “Where’s your God now?”

But here at Pentecost we see the new Israel born of the Holy Spirit proclaiming with supernatural power the mighty works of God and ready to take that proclamation back home to their corners of the world. Again, just as the old Pentecost festival was a celebration of the harvest in which the firstfruits were offered to the Lord in faith, so the “new” Pentecost is a celebration in which the Holy Spirit gives a foretaste of the harvest to come and in which we commit ourselves in faith to doing the work Jesus has commissioned us to do and for which the Spirit has equipped us.

But that’s just the aspect of Pentecost that has to do with the harvest. Pentecost is and always was a celebration and commemoration of the new life of God’s people. In the exodus the Lord redeemed and rescued his people and at Mt. Sinai he gave them his law. The law was meant to separate them, to remind them that they belonged to God and that they were a holy people, and it was also meant to be a witness to the nations of what it looks like and what it means to walk as God’s people. Moses went up onto the mountain and he came back down with the law written on stone tablets. And now at this “new” Pentecost we remember that just ten days before, Jesus ascended to his heavenly throne and he has sent the Spirit down with a new law, not this time written on tablets of stone, but come to tabernacle with his people, to fill us up, and to write that law on our hearts. The problem with the old law, the reason it was so difficult for Israel to keep, was that it was *external*—it said “do this” and “don’t do that”, but it didn’t have the power to transform sinful hearts, to actually reorient fallen human desires and affections. But this new law that Jesus has given is different. It’s written on the very hearts of his people by the Spirit who renews our minds and regenerates our hearts—he

clears our thinking and he changes the desire of our heart from sin to holiness, from the values of the present age to the values of the age to come, from love of ourselves to love for God.

With all this in mind it makes sense that the Spirit comes like the wind here in Acts. The Hebrew word for “spirit” is also the word for breath and it’s connected to the verb meaning “to blow”. God’s Spirit was there in the beginning, hovering over the waters. God’s Spirit was there in the beginning when he breathed life into us. And God’s Spirit came like a wind again at Pentecost to breathe or to blow the new life of Jesus into his people in a new act of creation. What Jesus has accomplished in his death and resurrection was applied to his people by the Spirit at Pentecost. And each of us, every Christian since that first day, has experienced Pentecost. In the waters of baptism Jesus calls us to follow him in faith. Each of us once passed through the baptismal waters much as Israel, in faith, followed Moses through the waters of the Red Sea. And as God met Israel on the far side to give her his law, so the Spirit meets us in our baptism, pours himself into us, and writes the law of grace on our hearts, applying the death and resurrection of Jesus to us and making us new.

And this is it. This is what we were made for. Going back all the way to the beginning of the story, back before Abraham, all the way back to Adam we see that human beings, men and women, were created by the Lord to be his priests. His Creation was his temple and he placed us in it to live in his presence, to experience his goodness, and to serve him in return by bearing his image as we expanded his rule, his dominion to the far reaches of the earth.

Instead, we rebelled. We made a mess of everything. We sinned, and because sin cannot exist in the presence of the holy, we were cast out

of the garden and out of God’s life-giving presence. We began to die and the world began to die with us. But in his loving grace the Lord did not give up on us. Again, the story. At the tower of Babel we see humanity at one of its lowest points, sunk in utter paganism, having lost all knowledge of God. And that’s precisely the time when the Lord stepped in and chose and called Abraham. And from Abraham on we see his redemptive work unfolding.

Jesus finally completed that work. In his death and resurrection he defeated sin and death and then he ascended. From his throne he sent his Spirit to apply his life-giving and life-restoring work to us. Think about that for a minute. Jesus is himself the firstfruits of God’s new creation, the first to be transformed and made new, the first human being to once again be as at home in heaven as on earth. In him we see heaven—God’s realm—and earth—our realm—coming back together as they were before our sin broke them apart. He ascended to his throne and from there he sends his Spirit back to us and in the Spirit the power and life of heaven are poured out on earth through us.

The Holy Spirit transforms us as he applies the work of Jesus to us and as he equips us to go out into the world with the power of heaven to make the lordship of Jesus known. On that first Pentecost the gift of tongues was especially prominent. It was a visible sign of the Spirit finally un-doing the curse of Babel—the firstfruits of an enormous harvest that Jesus calls and that the Spirit equips us to bring in. We need to look around us and ask what the Spirit is doing today, what he’s equipping and calling us to do here and now. The Spirit’s work isn’t always accomplished in wind and fire. The Spirit can just as well be subtle and move quietly. But the result of his moving—whether in big and loud ways or in quiet and small ways—is *always* dramatic. Men and women hear the royal proclamation of Jesus’

lordship, they hear the call to repentance, and they *change*. Hearts and minds are made new. But is that change happening around us? Again, looking out at the harvest to be brought in can be overwhelming.

Brothers and Sisters, begin by bearing the Spirit's fruit—live the life he has given you in Jesus. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—these are the fruit the Spirit bears in our lives as he unites our dead wood to Jesus the living vine. Pray for grace, pray for the Spirit to breathe the life of Jesus into you and to change you. And then pray for the faith and courage to use the gifts the Spirit has given to make Jesus known. Be faithful in using those gifts. Some are big and obvious, others are still and quiet. Some are meant to be used out in the world and others are meant to be used here in the Church to equip those who go out, but whatever your gifts *use them faithfully* to support the body of Christ. If you're an eye be an eye, if you're a foot by a foot, if you're a mouth be a mouth, if you're a heart be a heart, if you're an eyelash be an eyelash, and if you're a little toe be a little toe—big or small, seemingly small or seemingly big, we are together the body of Jesus and it's as we work together, living in love and grace, sharing our gifts, supporting and exhorting one another, and bearing the Spirit's fruit that we bring in the harvest, that we bless the world around us with the renewing life of Jesus, that we proclaim the good news of his death and resurrection, that we call people to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, and that his kingdom comes on earth as in heaven.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we pray that your kingdom will be manifest on earth as in heaven. Remind us this Pentecost that your kingdom comes as the life of Jesus is made known through us by the Holy Spirit. Make us faithful stewards of your grace and life. Teach us to bear your fruit and to be faithful with the gifts you have given and work through us, we pray,

to gather in your harvest. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.