



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Whitsunday: The On-Earth-As- In-Heaven People

Acts 2:1-11

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Last week as we remembered Jesus' ascension we read Luke's account of the risen Jesus and his final days with the disciples. He writes in Acts 1:

**And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. (Acts 1:4-5)**

That was all just fine, but what they really wanted to know was when the kingdom was coming. For years they'd been asking it in one way or another: When will you bring the kingdom? When will you take your throne? When will you set the world to rights? Are we there yet? How much further? And, remember, in answer to their question Jesus ascended, up on the clouds, into heaven, to take up his throne, to rule and to reign.

And as he did that, he commissioned his disciples to do something that I don't think they expected. He commissioned them to be his royal heralds, to go out and to proclaim this good news to Jerusalem, to Judea, even to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. Now, this wasn't the first time Jesus had sent his disciples out to proclaim the kingdom, but when he'd sent them out before, it was to a people who were also asking those "Are we there yet?" questions: When will the Messiah come? When will the kingdom come? When will the God of Israel set this broken world to

rights?. And the disciples went out and told the people that in Jesus the Messiah had come and that the kingdom was in sight. But now Jesus is sending them out to proclaim that in his resurrection and ascension the kingdom has come and that was no small task. Because even though the disciples had seen their risen Lord and even though they saw him ascend, things weren't what they or anyone else had expected. They thought everyone would be resurrected all at once. They thought the Messiah would put down the enemies of God's people and cast down their empires. They expected a king like David who would punish evil, wipe away all the problems, and make everything as it should be. Instead, the wrong people were still in control, evil people still did evil things, so much was still wrong with the world—and yet Jesus had inaugurated something, he really had risen from the dead, and they'd seen him ascend to his throne with their own eyes, so they knew he was truly Lord and that the kingdom had come. The Lord's plan was to work through *them*, to spread the good news and to tell the world that Jesus is Lord, and to grow the kingdom. *That* wasn't what anyone expected, but they should have, because that's how the Lord had been working in the world ever since he called Abraham out of the land of Ur and set him apart from everyone else, and made him and his family a witness to the world—that one day, through this people, the whole earth would know the Lord and his greatness and his goodness and his faithfulness and come to give him glory.

I wonder if we, too, don't forget this sometimes. We might know better deep down, but we kind of assume that the Christian life is, more or less, a personal thing. We raise our kids in it. Maybe we talk to a few close people about it. But we act as if our duty is mostly just to be good, godly people until Jesus comes back and sets everything to rights—as if he's the one who's going to make it all happen by doing all the hard work. Sure, there

are *some* people called to be missionaries who go off to faraway places where they've never heard of Jesus, but for most of us, it's just a personal, individual sort of thing. Even the dominant eschatology of our day assumes that things will just get worse and worse until Jesus zaps us all out of here and rains down fire and brimstone on this awful, corrupt world. But that's never what the story was about and that's never where it was headed. The Lord called and created a people to make him known with the expectation that eventually that people—not in their own power, but in his—but *that people* would really make him known until, as the prophets Isaiah and Habakkuk both said, the knowledge of his glory would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Maybe we forget our part in this kingdom mission because it seems so impossible. What? Us? Grow the kingdom until the knowledge of the glory of the Lord covers the earth? What? Us? Bring the nations to give him glory? That's too big for us? We'll just be holy over here and wait for Jesus to come back and do the impossible stuff. And at this point, Jesus' disciples had no idea just how big and impossible the task was. Taking the gospel to the gentiles wasn't even on their radar. They were still thinking it was a message for Jews. It would be a few years before the full extent of it even sank in. And this is why Jesus told his friends to stay in Jerusalem and to wait. In his resurrection he was vindicated as the Messiah. In his ascension he took his throne and sent the clear message that the kingdom has come. But before the disciples could go on with the work of the kingdom, they needed something that God's people had never had before—at least not in this way. They needed the power of the Holy Spirit to truly be the new Israel, to carry on the mission the Lord had given to Abraham and Isaac, and to all of Israel: to bless the nations by making him known to them. Without the Spirit, Jesus' disciples would have the

same problem God's people had always had and after a time, when the excitement wore off, they would become fickle and faithless and their loyalties would be divided and they would fall into sin and the nations would mock them, this time jeering, "Where's your Jesus now?" No, they needed this gift of the indwelling Spirit to set their hearts on God and to write his law of love on their hearts—truly transforming their affections. And it was this Spirit who would empower them to go out into a hostile world with the good news about Jesus and to live out his love and his grace and his justice, carrying the kingdom to the ends of the earth. That's why they had to wait in Jerusalem.

I don't think they really had any idea what was about to happen. They didn't even really understand the full extent of the mission he'd given them. They were just excited because of his resurrection and his ascension and Luke says that while they waited in Jerusalem that they spent their time in the temple praising and blessing God. And then comes our Epistle today. Look at Acts 2. Luke writes,

### **When the day of Pentecost arrived...**

Let's stop there. This isn't an incidental detail. It's integral to the story. As integral as Jesus having been born a Jew. As integral as his death and resurrection taking place at Passover. "Pentecost" just means "fiftieth" in Greek. Greek-speaking Jews gave the festival this name because it fell fifty days after Passover, but its biblical name was the "feast of weeks" and it was connected with the wheat harvest. It was when the Lord commanded his people to bring him their firstfruits. That's the very first part of the harvest. It was an offering to the Lord and it was an act of faith on their part. Other peoples brought offerings to their gods *after* the harvest had been brought in, once they knew what they could spare. But Israel gave in faith from the very first

of the harvest, trusting the Lord to give the rest. So Pentecost was a feast of expectation and faith.

But Pentecost was also the feast when Israel celebrated the giving of the law, the *torah*, at Mt. Sinai. That's where the significance of "fifty" comes from. Again, it follows fifty days after Passover and you'll remember that Passover commemorated Israel's exodus from Egypt: their slavery, Moses and the Lord's command to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!", the plagues, the blood on the doorposts, the sparing of Israel's firstborn sons, the flight from Egypt, the rescue at the Red Sea. Passover was a festival of the Lord's deliverance of his people and it celebrated that great even in which Israel was born as a nation. And each generation participated in those events anew as they gathered year in and year out in their homes to share the Passover meal. It marked them out as the Lord's covenant people.

But that wasn't the end of the story. From the Red Sea, the Lord led his people into the wilderness and *fifty* days later he gave them his law. He called Moses up to Mt. Sinai and when Moses came back down he brought the law with him, carved on stone tablets. In the Exodus the Lord had made Israel his people. At Mt. Sinai he showed them what it meant and what it looked like to be his people. So at *Passover* the Jews celebrated their redemption. At *Pentecost* they remembered that the Lord had redeemed them for a purpose: to live a new kind of life in order to fulfil his purposes and their calling.

Can you see how this all fits together with the events of the Gospels? Easter is our Passover, when we remember how, through Jesus, the Lord redeemed us from our bondage to sin and death and made us his people. And now, on Pentecost—this is our Mt. Sinai. Let's continue with Acts 2:

**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.**

In Exodus we're given an awesome picture of the holiness of God as his presence descended on the mountain in smoke and fire and thunder, and here the Spirit comes again like a storm, in this mighty rushing wind and fire descends upon his people. And here Luke tells this new story to parallel the old. As Moses went up on the mountain to the Lord, so Jesus has ascended into heaven. And now Luke wants us to understand that Jesus, just as he promised he would, has come back down. Moses came down with tablets of stone to tell the people how to live as the Lord's covenant people. And now Jesus has returned, he's come down from heaven in the person of the Holy Spirit, to write his law of love on the very hearts of his people.

Don't misunderstand. That doesn't mean that Israel had a harsh and rigid law written on stone and that Jesus' people just "follow their hearts" or something like that. There's a sense in which that's true, but definitely not in the sense that the world talks about following your heart. Following our hearts is what has got us into trouble and made a mess of this world, because apart from Jesus and the Spirit our hearts are set on sin and self. That's the point here. The law written on stone showed Israel how to live as God's holy people, but it couldn't change the affections of their hearts. The Spirit, on the other hand, takes away the need for those stone tablets by changing our very hearts, filling them with a love for God and a desire for holiness, and by turning us away from sin and from self.

And notice how the wind and the fire come from heaven. Through the Spirit the creative and renewing power of the Lord—the very breath that he breathed into humanity to give us life in the first place—it descends on his people to accomplish his work on earth.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray “on earth as it is in heaven” and Pentecost was the firstfruits of an answer to that prayer. Sometimes Christians treat the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit as things that raise us up above the world or that make the world irrelevant, but it’s really just the opposite. The Spirit is the life-giving breath of God that gives us a foretaste of the resurrection and of the life we hope for one day in this world set to rights. As the Spirit sets our hearts on God, he makes us the “on earth as it is in heaven” people, the people who not only show the world what God’s kingdom looks like, but who actually live out his kingdom and its values of love and grace and mercy and justice in the midst of a world that values all the opposites of those things.

But the first manifestation of the Spirit’s “on earth as it is in heaven” ministry is what we see here. Luke says, first, that Jesus’ people were all together when this happened—they were united—and then the first manifestation of the Spirit was this amazing speech in other languages. But what exactly was it? Let’s keep reading from verse 5:

**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.”**

Jews had spread out across the known world and festivals like Passover and Pentecost brought them back to Jerusalem. The Spirit came on Jesus’ disciples with fire and the sound of a mighty rushing wind, but what everyone else couldn’t help but notice was the ruckus they made as they began to speak in these other languages. And it got their attention. The disciples were a bunch of rubes from Galilee, way up north, or at least that’s how people in Jerusalem would have seen them. Galileans spoke Aramaic and Greek—the local languages—but they weren’t cosmopolitan enough to speak all these other languages. And yet these men visiting Jerusalem from places like Egypt and Asia and even from places like Parthia, beyond the borders of the empire, heard these Galileans speaking in their own languages. That made them stop and take note. But what they were saying caught their attention even more. Luke says they were telling of the mighty works of God. In the context here that can mean only one thing. They were proclaiming the good news about Jesus. That he had come proclaiming the kingdom and calling the people to repentance, that he had been crucified, that he had risen from the dead, and that he had ascended, and is now Lord—and maybe most of all, that he had done this in fulfilment of the Lord’s promises and to show the Lord’s faithfulness. Many of these visitors had, no doubt, heard about Jesus and how he’d been crucified just a few weeks before. Some of them had probably heard rumors that he’d risen from the dead. If they’d been spending any time around the temple, they would have heard and seen the disciples praising God for what he had done in Jesus—and they probably

thought they were crazy. But now they hear these bumpkins from Galilee declaring the mighty works of God miraculously in their own languages and they stop. And they listen. And some of them, Luke says, sneered at the disciples thinking they were drunk. But that’s when—if we were to continue on from today’s Epistle in Chapter 2—that’s when Peter stood up addressed them, saying, “It’s nine o’clock in the morning. It’s hardly the time of day for men to be drunk. No, what you’re seeing is the fulfilment of the words spoken by the prophet Joel when he spoke of the Lord’s promise to pour out his Spirit and to redeem his people. And Peter went on to tell the men there, again, of the mighty deed of God: of Jesus, of his death, of his resurrection, and his ascension. And he walked the men through the scriptures they knew so well and through the promises the Lord had made to his people, and he showed how Jesus had and was fulfilling them. He finished his sermon, Luke says, proclaiming:

**“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”** (Acts 2:36)

And the men who were listening were cut to the heart and cried out to Peter, “What should we do?”

**And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.** (Acts 2:38-41)

The “on earth as it is in heaven” people began to grow. The rest of the book of Acts is Luke’s testimony to the mighty deeds of God through these people, empowered by Jesus and the Spirit. We see the gospel—and with it the kingdom—going out from Jerusalem, to Judea, and then to Samaria, where it united Jews and Samaritans for the first time. And then see it go out to the nations, to the gentiles, the book ending with Paul proclaiming the good news about Jesus in Rome, right under Caesar’s nose. And Acts shows us churches sprouting up across the world. Acts is the firstfruits of the kingdom harvest—a harvest that would, eventually include the whole Roman Empire and beyond. And, Brothers and Sisters, Pentecost reminds us how. Without it we might be tempted to give up, to retreat into the church building, and wait for Jesus to come and do it all himself. But Pentecost reminds us that going all the way back to Abraham, the Lord has been calling and creating and empowering a people to make him known to a world lost in darkness, a people to be light, a people—like the disciples that day in Jerusalem—to proclaim to the world the mighty deeds of the God of Israel. A people to proclaim the good news that in this Jesus who was crucified, who has risen from the dead, and who has ascended to his throne to rule and reign, that he is and that he will set this world to rights. But, maybe most importantly, Pentecost reminds us that Jesus has called *us* and made *us* this people, not only to go out and to tell, but to go out and live and to do and to make and to build and to show his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We do that as we live the fruit the Spirit has given and as we show the world, in real, practical, hands-on ways what God’s new creation is like, living his love and his mercy and his grace and his justice and working for those things in the world. It is an impossible task, but Pentecost also reminds us that we are not called to do it in our own power or on our own

terms, but as we are empowered and guided by Jesus and the Spirit.

Let’s pray: O God, who on this day taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*