

What Does Pentecost Mean?

There are parts of God's word that when we read them, we tell ourselves: 'I just don't get it.' Of all the sections of scripture to read, this section above all is a difficult section to sort out. After all, there are howling winds. There are flames of fire. There are people speaking languages in precision with specific dialects. After we read these words, we end up in the same place that the people did on the day of Pentecost *"Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?'"*¹

What does this mean? Or to be more specific, what does Pentecost mean? Years ago, I had a friend who grew up as a Lutheran. But, when he grew up, he went with some friends and visited a local evangelical church. He heard the amazing music. He heard a fiery sermon from a charismatic preacher. He saw people standing and singing with their arms up in the air. He even saw people speaking in words and speech he did not understand. He went to this church with his friends. And afterward they went out for coffee. And he said to his friends: "my church isn't like that at all. We don't have songs like that. We don't have swaying lifting up hands. We don't have people speaking in tongues." And the friend said to him: "You don't? All of these things you saw are signs of the Holy Spirit. If your church doesn't have what you saw, are you really sure you have the Holy Spirit?"

My brothers and sisters, it is important to listen to this conversation this Lutheran had as he visited with his non-Lutheran friends. Because, at some point you will have the same conversation. Someone will ask you: "If you don't feel the Holy Spirit inside of you, can you really be sure that you *have* the Holy Spirit? If you haven't made your decision for Christ, can you be sure you have the Holy Spirit inside of you? If you can't speak in tongues, are you really sure that you have the Holy Spirit?"

So, my brothers and sisters, what does Pentecost mean to you? How can you be sure that you have the Holy Spirit? The bible has a very clear and profound way of answering that question. Let me ask you three questions. First, For the sins of how many people did Jesus die? He died for the sins of *all* people. Peter tells us: *"For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."*² . Second, if Jesus died for the sins of everyone, then did Jesus die for *your* sins? Now, here at the third question is where it gets interesting. Here at the this third question is where Pentecost and the Holy Spirit matter. Third, do you understand that Jesus died for your sins? And here is the part where you shake your heads and say: "yes, Pastor, even all of children know this fact. This is nothing special, amazing or new." Oh, but my brothers and sisters, *it is!* You would not be able to say those words and mean them unless the Holy Spirit had brought you to faith. How so? Listen to what God's words says: *"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."*³

The man without the Holy Spirit does not get what God's word says. This amazing fact that Jesus died for your sins the unbeliever does not understand. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is the one who converts hearts. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings you out of spiritual darkness into the wonderful light of God's truth.

My brothers and sisters, these are words to rejoice in. Because it means that the message God spoke to you was not in vain. It means the baptisms that you received—even if you were a tiny, little baby, are not in vain. For through this precious gospel in word and sacrament the Holy Spirit introduces you to Jesus who died for your sins and gives to you true joy in this fact.

You see, there so many Christians out there who base their salvation on that word, "I". They say "I decided for Christ. I have the joy of Christ in my heart. I can speak in tongues." You base your salvation on the unyielding, unbending promises of God.

What does Pentecost mean? The meaning of Pentecost is not that we find proof for the Holy Spirit in us. And that then leads us to the real question for this morning: What does Pentecost mean then? Let me read just a couple of verses from our lesson this morning: *"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons*

¹(Acts 2:12 NIV)

²(1 Peter 3:18 NIV)

³(1 Corinthians 2:14 NIV)

and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke.”⁴

You remember, in the gospel from a couple of weeks ago, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit. Now here is where we need to clear some details up. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit. But, do not be mistaken, they already *had* the Holy Spirit. When you believe one member of the Triune God in your heart, you also have the others. Why? Because there are not three God’s. There is one God. They already had the Holy Spirit. What does Jesus mean then by the word, ‘send’? Here in these words from the Old Testament prophet of Joel we find the answer. We hear the words ‘pour out.’ The third member of the Trinity—the one who likes to do his amazing work in the background is now, for a time, going to come into the spotlight. The work of creating faith and sustaining it which is hidden will now be seen. And that’s what Peter preaches about. He let’s these God-fearing Jews who came from the various parts of the world know that they were seeing prophecy being fulfilled. Joel spoke of fire and smoke. And with their own eyes they saw the fire and smoke.

One of the lessons we learn from this is that the work the Holy Spirit does is both *impossible* and *precious*. None of the people gathered there could put tongues of fire on their own heads. None of them could speak in the languages and dialects⁵ of people from various parts of the globe on their own. Imagine for a moment a person from China who does not know a word of English coming to West Newton. And all of a sudden, the person doesn’t just say ‘are you going downtown?’ No, instead, he speaks with your dialect. He says “You’uns, gun dahhn-tahhn?”

Impossible, right? But nothing is impossible with God. The Holy Spirit did the impossible. He brought you to faith. And that’s nothing you could earn. That’s nothing you could choose. That’s nothing even you could feel. And if he did the impossible with you, do not be surprised if can do the impossible with others. Years ago, my professor told me a story about what life was like for him when he was a pastor. He said that one of his favorite parts of being a pastor was adult instruction class. He said that it always seemed to turn out this way: There would be a nice, young woman who grew up in the church as a Lutheran. She started dating a young man. And, then, before he knew what was happening, he was in an instruction class. And you could tell, that for those first few weeks or months, the guy wasn’t buying into this whole Jesus-thing. But then, at some point, everything changed. The light went on. Instead of sitting there slouching with the arms crossed, he sat up. Instead of staring at the paint on the walls he stared at the pastor who was sharing God’s word. It was at this point that my professor did something I could never get away with. He would turn to the young man and say: “you know, you’ve learned a lot in these weeks. Maybe we’ve learned enough.” And the poor guy—it looked as if you had just told him that his favorite dog had just died. And so, the young man says: “uhh, no, maybe I’ll go to a couple more classes—just to be sure.”

My brothers and sisters, *that* is what Pentecost means. It means that the Holy Spirit can do the impossible. You can go to an unbeliever and use such clear and eloquent logic. And it won’t work. You can go to an unbeliever and use such passionate, heartfelt word and it still won’t work. And then, when all of that doesn’t work, you can use actually share God’s word. And with that the Holy Spirit can do miracles. He can move an unbeliever out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Finally then, let me leave you with one encouragement. As you consider the person in your life who does not know Jesus, or the person who believes in Jesus, but also believes in many poisonous teachings. As you think of them, do not give up on the Holy Spirit. He can do the impossible. He can make unbelievers Christians. And even more than that, he can make Christians united in all of what God’s word says.

What does Pentecost mean? It does not mean that we can do the impossible for ourselves. It means that the Holy Spirit does the impossible to us. Amen.

⁴(Acts 2:17–19 NIV)

⁵"ἕκαστος ἐς ἑαυτοῦ τῆ ἰδίᾳ διαλέκτῳ λαλῶντων αὐτῶν" (Acts 2:6 GNT-T)