

Sermon Text For May 31, 2020 – PENTECOST SUNDAY

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Numbers 11:24-30, John 20:19-23

“Spirit of the Living God”

Welcome to Pentecost Sunday. So, normally this would be that Sunday, one of my favorite, when the church would be full, I know, we are strange like that, we like to fill the building on Pentecost just to most accurately reflect what happened on the actual day of Pentecost. And as you look out into the sanctuary you would see a wave of red, and then there would be those of you who would stick out like a sore thumb because you forgot. Well, today, only you and your family will know if you forgot that it was Pentecost Sunday.

It is such an important day in the life of the church. We call it the birthday of the Christian church because the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, all of them, the men and the women, with a mighty wind and tongues of flame. This is why we wear red, to remember the flame of the Holy Spirit, the power of the Holy Spirit. Pretty much every year I give a linguistic lesson on the Hebrew ruach for wind, breath, air, spirit juxtaposed with the Greek pneuma which means the same. I could do that again this year, but that is not what I want to share with you today from Scripture.

Both of our Scriptures today depict the people of God in different contexts. Our Old Testament Scripture shows us one community in the wilderness and our New Testament reading we find a community sheltering in place with the doors shut tight. In both of these instances that we are going to see today the Spirit of the living God falls and transforms the people of God powerfully. Every Sunday when we were gathered we would sing together Spirit of the Living God as the children would walk up for the children’s message. It would start the section of the service where we are getting ready for the reading and the preaching of the Word of God. Some churches have what is called a prayer for illumination, for inspiration, we have a song, and it is called Spirit of the Living God.

Today, in our Scripture, we see God’s desire is that we would all be motivated by God’s Holy Spirit in our lives and that Holy Spirit, this is where you can start to take notes, this Holy Spirit always moves us toward peace. But this peace that God requires, that God desires, that God demands, never has to come at the cost of justice. God’s justice always prevails and the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in bringing about that peace which has at its center justice for all of us, every single one of us. Let’s read.

READ SCRIPTURE

This is where I normally give a social commentary on what is happening in the world around us. I think my words and hopefully my actions have been consistent in my views on why our nation has no peace right now. It is interesting, because we live in a culture where individuals think that they can make statements, take actions, and only focus on what they want to control. I have often heard someone ask another person: do you have the Spirit? That question again comes from an understanding of God, and I would argue probably our view of our neighbor as well, that we could in any way control presence of God. We can never have the Spirit, the Spirit has us and chooses to do with us as God pleases.

I love our first Scripture, it is a pretty unfamiliar text but it is perfect for Pentecost, and it fits perfectly with God's desire for us and the Holy Spirit. Moses and the Israelites are in the wilderness after they have escaped from Pharaoh, God chooses 70 elders from the tribes on whom he gives his Spirit. They do God's deeds with the Spirit, except for 2 of them who weren't present when the Spirit was given out. They were back in the camp, maybe they slept in. But they also got the spirit and they began to use that Holy Spirit in powerful ways in the camp.

Joshua, who eventually becomes the leader of Israel after the death of Moses, comes running up to Moses and says Moses, Moses, two people are empowered with the Holy Spirit and they are doing amazing deeds, stop them! You see, Joshua at this early age, had thought that God and Moses had only chosen a certain people who were going to be God's agents and no one else should be able to have the relationship with God. Yes, we are being unfair to Joshua, but Moses' response is one that we have to hear and apply to ourselves today.

He states, and we are going to use this verses as our cornerstone for today: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them." Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, speakers of truth in a time when we would rather build our base up at the expense of those who historically have been trodden under knee, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them so that they would lift up their necks and rise like on the wings of an eagle.

What Moses tells us today is God's desire, he is describing how we are God's utopia, this is what God wants us to become. This is God's vision for every single one of us. Or as Joel states in 2:28-32 "Then I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, in those days I will pour out my spirit." You may not know something about the work that we did in Russia. One aspect of the church where we served is that we had a racial task force which documented instances of racial

attacks and abuse on people of color in Moscow. We did a survey I believe in 2009 and 80% of the people that we interviewed had suffered a racially motivated attack.

A member of our church was stabbed 5 times on his way home from church. A woman from our church who was in labor was kicked out of an ambulance on the way to the hospital because those serving her didn't want to get her germs. A member of our church died in an internet café because no one helped him while he was going into diabetic shock. People of color who had been trafficked to Moscow found a refuge in our church and we were able to resettle dozens into the United States because their lives were in danger in Moscow. Some are listening right now. After 5 years, I need to be honest, I wasn't tired, I just needed a bit of a break. It was the most difficult work I have ever done, but also the most satisfying ministry that I have ever been a part of.

When Moses says I wish that the Spirit of God were on everyone and we find ourselves in a country where the Christian church is more upset about not having prayer in school than they are when a fellow Christian is killed while jogging, has his neck crushed while people look on, killed while relaxing on his couch, killed after being pulled over for bad light, killed walking with his hood up, accused while bird watching. I want to say to that Joshua who maybe is upset because the Christian church should only look like people like me, how I wish we realized that the Holy Spirit is more powerful in the homes and the churches of those who are downtrodden and those that we lynch than in our own churches. I wonder if the Holy Spirit is even present any longer in the evangelical churches who are more interested in keeping the status quo, and making their home great, than looking for prophets in their community who are very different from they are. Or in the liberal church filled with Karens who are sure that they are different from others, but we all have our racist tendencies some buried deep within us, some in public display.

Everywhere in the Bible we read about the Spirit being poured out upon people, all people. Deborah, Samsom, David, Ezekiel, Mary, Philip, the list goes on. In fact it seems like if you are a child of God it would be unusual if you did not have the Holy Spirit fall on you. God was just giving it out to everyone. In fact, Simon in the New Testament noticed that and was wondering if he could buy it.

This brings us to the New Testament and John 20. We find ourselves after the resurrection and the disciples had had quite a day. Notice that in the very beginning, in vs.19, we have a time stamp. When it was evening on that day. What day is that day? Go back, it was the

day of the resurrection. What a day that was. The disciples are utterly confused, they heard from Mary Magdalene that she had actually seen Jesus, the tomb was definitely empty, and all sorts of rumors were swirling around.

We read in that same verse that they were in their house and the doors of their house were closed and locked. They were under shelter in place. But they were closed because they were afraid of the Jews who were looking for them to put them to death. People like Paul who were breathing threats and murder were looking to find them and bring them to the temple and the synagogues and accuse them.

I have told you that we have never experienced this kind of experience in our lives. We have never had to shelter in place because of an unseen and unknown enemy. But the people of God have. This is pretty common for the people of God. The people of Israel had to shelter in place while the Passover angel flew over the homes. The disciples of Jesus here shelter in place after the resurrection to ensure their safety. People of color have had to shelter in place for generations in this country as they are confronted while driving, shopping, doing every day activities that for the rest of us we don't have to think twice about. I was wrong, while we may not have experienced this before in our lives, there are people every day who think about going out of their homes in a very different way than I do, who have to take precautions simply to go out and not because they are immuno compromised, but because we have been institutionally programmed to see a different color as bad.

Jesus appear with them while the doors are locked and closed. Just appears. Even while we are in our homes with our doors closed Jesus is still able to appear. He breathes on his disciples, okay, not a great example. God, can we look at something else today? But he breathes on his disciples just like what we find in Genesis 2:7 "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Jesus breathes the breath of life into his disciples just like he said he would in John 14:12 where he says: "Those who believe in me will also do works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works."

So Moses scolds Joshua because he wanted all the people to have the Spirit of God. Jesus breathes upon his disciples so that they could do these works that were promised through the Holy Spirit. What were these works? Three times Jesus says "peace be with you." I strikes me that only the one who was abused and struck down and killed on the cross is the one who can

call for peace. The one who has the Holy Spirit is able to breathe it upon his disciples so that they would have that same peace and be able to pass it on to others.

But if you are the Roman centurion, you can't call for peace just because your city is burning. If you are the disciple who ran away from the cross while your Savior was bleeding and dying you can't demand forgiveness or peace. Only the one who was crucified, only the one who was struck down, only the one who was in the ground is able to call for peace because they understand what it is like to be in the ground. We find ourselves who have not been in this position of weakness, who have been great all along or seeking to reclaim a greatness that we thought was once ours, demanding that people act in a certain way. But we don't know, we don't know what it is like to truly be behind closed and locked doors every day of your life.

Earlier in Jesus' life he repeats the words of Isaiah while he is in his home church. He said from Isaiah 61:1 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." There will not be the peace of Christ as our cities burn until this justice that Jesus proclaims actually takes place.

My prayer for all of us which may be the most significant time in our nation's history, and I'm not prone to hyperbole, is that we take advantage of this Pentecost Sunday to seek the Spirit of the Lord and that it would fall on us so that we could let the oppressed go free. Amen.