

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

June 5, 2022 – DAY OF PENTECOST (YR. C)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*We Got the Power!*”*

Acts 2:1-21 (The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples and Jesus’ mother)
Psalm 104:25–35, 37 (Praise for God’s Creation and the work of God’s Spirit)
Romans 8:14–17 (All who are led by the Spirit are God’s children)
St. John 14:8–17, 25–27 (The Holy Spirit will be our advocate, teacher, and guide)

Rick and I live in an older apartment building at Cornwall Manor. We found out the hard way that the electrical wiring for Laurel Place wasn’t cutting it. Starting a couple of months ago, the electricity would go out, but the system failed to connect to the generator. In order to fix the problem, three different days of outages, each from 10 pm to 6 am were required. That’s 8 hours at a time, with *no electricity*—when *nothing* worked! No lights, air conditioning or fan, landline phone, Internet, TV or other appliances; and *definitely* no opening the refrigerator or freezer! Thank goodness for flashlights. This experience made us realize that we don’t generally appreciate how totally we depend on electric power.

And in the Church, we don’t often realize how much we need Pentecost—the day when God gave His Holy Spirit to empower all believers, not just a few, and the birthday of the New Testament Church. Between Ascension and Pentecost, we live in liturgical limbo, existing between two pillars of our Christian faith—our Lord’s ascent into heaven, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Like the Apostles whom Jesus instructed to “wait in Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49), we too, have been waiting. They waited because the Lord told them to wait. But they were awaiting something far greater than they could ever imagine. A powerful experience was about to happen to them, because the Holy Spirit would change them forever. Fear would be turned into a martyr’s boldness; doubt would be replaced by mountain-moving faith; and fishermen and tax collectors would re-shape the world—because of Pentecost!¹

No longer was the Holy Spirit to dwell only in the Temple, or only be given to prophets, priests, and kings, as we read about in the Old Testament. Before, God’s *Shekinah*—His divine presence—in the form of a cloud, was revealed to His people above the Ark of Covenant in the Holy of Holies. And the anointing of the Holy Spirit was given only to select leaders of Israel. But because of Pentecost, every Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and all who believe in Jesus are brought into His royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9).

Pentecost also shows us that Christianity is not some human-created religion. If our faith were simply of human design, the disciples wouldn’t have needed to wait in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Why would they? Having lived with Jesus for several years, they had already received an intense and personal seminary training, and had interned as preachers and healers. They could’ve begun writing, teaching, ministering, and passing on what they had learned, without a Pentecost.

However, our religion isn’t just about concepts, moral guidance, or ethical norms. Of course, it has these things, but that’s not what the Christian faith is only about. If it were, we Christians would be another version of the Pharisees. No, Christianity is about the Holy Spirit calling people through the words of the Gospels, enlightening them with God’s gifts, and sanctifying and keeping them in the true faith.

Pentecost is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to send a Helper, a Counselor, a Guide, and a Comforter. As God breathed into Adam and he became a living being, so Christ breathes the Holy Spirit into His people, and our spirits come alive! That’s what Pentecost is all about. Filled with God’s life-giving Spirit, we come alive in ways we never knew before. We find grace to love the unlovable, astonishing strength to endure adversity, unconditional compassion for the suffering, and a passionate desire to confess and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Sadly, many Christians live as if they *are* stuck between Ascension and Pentecost, or as if Pentecost never happened. We live our lives as if the Christian faith were only a set of ideas, standards, and rules. We think we are Episcopalians because we intellectually follow the Prayer Book or subscribe to the Articles of Religion found therein—or simply because being one has always been our family’s tradition.

If the Apostles had remained in that state of limbo between Ascension and Pentecost, they would never have carried the Gospel to the world. They would never have lived out their faith as boldly as they did, or died so courageously for their faith as they did. They certainly could not have preached as powerfully as they did, converting thousands at a time. Nor could they have done the miracles we read about in the Acts of the Apostles, wonders that brought people to faith in Christ. God the Holy Spirit was moving, and breathing within their faith lives—and it showed in everything Jesus’ followers said and did. Because God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, He can do the same for us, in our time.

Many in The Episcopal Church are reluctant to take seriously that we are living as post-Pentecost Christians. We’re afraid of the noisy chaos we’ve seen in “Pentecostal” churches on TV—and God forbid we should speak in tongues or raise anyone from the dead. We get comfortable with an “acceptable faith,” one in which sin continues to control at least part of our lives, and we resign ourselves to a joyless, underpowered Christianity. If we are content with a faith like this, we are more like Jesus’ fearful and doubting disciples before Pentecost.

Without Pentecost, Christianity is an empty shell. If the Holy Spirit doesn’t permeate our lives with His presence, then the practice of our faith consists of only hollow gestures. If, through the working of the Holy Spirit, God’s Word does not affect and change our lives for the better, then our Christian life is without power. It is as dark and limited as our apartment was without electricity all night long.

Consider how the life and ministry of the Church depends on the Holy Spirit. Baptism saves us because we are born of water and the Spirit (John 3:3-5). Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no forgiveness in absolution. That’s why our Lord gathered His Apostles together and breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain them, they are retained” (John 20:23). Think of how the Church still ordains pastors. Jesus never commanded it. But ordination is a special giving of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands for men and women to become priests. As the Apostle Paul told Pastor Timothy, “Do not neglect the gift in you . . . by the laying on of hands” (1 Timothy 4:14). St. Paul also told him to “fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God has not given us [that is, Paul and Timothy] a Spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment” (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

Perhaps even more important, now think of the Mystery of Mysteries: the core of Christ’s New Covenant with His people, the Holy Eucharist. The existence of Christ’s Body and Blood in Communion depends on the Holy Spirit working through the Word. It’s the Holy Spirit working through the words the priest speaks over the bread and wine, which makes the Lord’s Supper the Lord’s Supper. Everything Christ has commanded His Church to do would be simply empty formalities without the Holy Spirit.

This is also true in matters of faith and practice. There is no prayer without the Holy Spirit praying in and through us. Fasting is simply dieting if it is not done with the Spirit’s help to curb our sinful flesh. It’s no coincidence that when our Lord went into the desert to fast for 40 days, He was “led by the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1). We can’t overcome sin in our life without the Holy Spirit. He is the One who enables us to “put to death the deeds of the body” (Romans 8:13), and the One who is active to forgive us when we repent and receive absolution.

Okay, some of you may be wondering now: “How do I experience this Pentecost Christianity?” Perhaps you feel stuck between Ascension and Pentecost . . . or maybe you aren’t. But ask yourself this: “Can God raise the dead? Can He breathe life into nothingness? Can He revive, renew, and recreate His people, His saints on earth?” Of course He can! And He does, and He will, by His Spirit, His breath, and His words.

The danger is that we try to recreate Pentecost for ourselves, as if we can make happen within us what only God the Holy Spirit can do. This is one of the great sins of our age: we think we can, by our own work and effort bring about the Holy Spirit's power—by manipulating external factors such as praise music, or focusing with tunnel-vision on *trying to develop* the gifts of the Spirit (healing, prophecy, wisdom, and so forth). But what would happen after a few months of working to manufacture a Holy Spirit-like effect in your life? Your faith and practice would lapse back into the ordinary, mundane, boring same-old-same-old.

We cannot create a Pentecost in our lives. Only God the Holy Spirit can do that! But thanks be to God that Christ, as He stands at the right hand of the Father, is living and breathing. As such, He sends the Spirit like a fresh wind across the face of His people, igniting Pentecost when and where He chooses. For, the Holy Spirit produces faith when and where He wills, in those who hear the Gospel, and He gives the gifts of the Spirit to those whom He wills, for the building up of the Church.

The problem with letting Pentecost enchant us for the wrong reasons is that we take our eyes off Jesus. That's where the Spirit wants us to look, to Jesus, instead of being bedazzled by all the Pentecostal pyrotechnics. The Holy Spirit wants to bring glory to Jesus, not Himself. The Holy Spirit is like a spotlight shining on Christ. As with all spotlights, you focus on where the beam is shining, not on the beam itself. So it is with the Spirit. Our confidence in the Spirit's presence and working is not in the wind, the fire, or the tongues.

No, it's in the preaching and teaching of Jesus; it's in receiving His forgiveness; it's in Holy Baptism; in His Body and Blood; and in God's Word, the Bible. That's where the Spirit is active, that's where Pentecost is happening today, here and now, for you. And that's where to go looking for it!

The continuing work of Pentecost is not in the flaming tongues of fire—as enthralling as that is. It's in the Word that brings repentance of sins and faith in Jesus. And in the encouragement and equipping we receive to share that message with the world.

The Spirit of God continues to call every one of us through the Gospel, enlightening us with His gifts, sanctifying us, and keeping us in the true faith. Yes, we are part of that great breath and fiery wind of Pentecost that guarantees our spiritually lifeless souls will now live forever. How can we be certain of this? Because we believe in Jesus Christ—and we can only do that through the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and lives. And whenever we experience that, we *are* living the Pentecost experience. As a great punk-rock song says, “We got the power!”

Hallelujah! *Amen.*

* Title of a 2017 song by “Gorillaz,” a British punk-rock band. [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBTjYcXCOXE) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBTjYcXCOXE>> 31 May 2022.

¹ Adapt. Richard Futrell, “Pentecost—A Real Reality,” 7 October 2010, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/pentecost-a-real-reality-richard-futrell-sermon-on-pentecost-150679) <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/pentecost-a-real-reality-richard-futrell-sermon-on-pentecost-150679>> 31 May 2022. Used with permission.