

Acts 1:1-5
(Ezekiel 36:22-28; John 1:29-34)
“The Father’s Promise”

Introduction

If Christ is risen and has triumphed over sin and death, why are so many of us still living such weak and defeated lives? Why do we too often live like the people around us who claim no experience of God’s grace? Why do we tend to think of Christianity as little more than forgiveness of sin, missing the heart of the message: namely, that God offers us a new life in exchange for the old?

The gospel is an act in three movements: Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The church historically has taken Christmas and Easter so seriously that it has set seasons of preparation, Advent and Lent, which begin weeks in advance of the great celebrations. The idea is that we do not want to let these days come around and catch us unprepared, lest we miss the meaning and blessing of each season. *Isn’t it curious that there is no such season of preparation for Pentecost, the day that new life was actually brought in its fullness of power to the church of Jesus Christ? Yet, Jesus spent the forty days following his resurrection preparing his disciples for Pentecost, and they spent an additional ten days in together in prayer, waiting for the appointed moment to come.* Without Pentecost, the events of Christmas and Easter are to no effect. It is Pentecost that completes and seals all that God has done to redeem us from bondage to sin and death, and to give us the new life that Jesus won for us in his death and victory.

On this final Sunday of Easter season, as we prepare for the start of Pentecost, I encourage you to consider with me the nature of the promise that God fulfilled on that epoch changing Pentecost recorded in Acts 2. If we are to claim the privileges that Jesus won for us in his victory over sin and death, we must understand and begin to appropriate the gift that brings us all of the other gifts and privileges that enable us to be an outpost of God’s kingdom, a place where his kingdom comes and his will is done on earth as in heaven. If the Spirit is not at the heart of everything we do, we merely operate out of what the Bible calls “the flesh,” the old life apart from grace, and what we do, however impressive it may seem at the present time, lacks the power of God to make all things new.

So this morning, we will look together at this great promise of God to his people that is so central a theme to the Old Testament and the Gospels. What is this promise, what is its substance and meaning for us? Next Sunday, on Pentecost, we will look at the difference in one’s experience of the Spirit under the old and new covenants, at the difference between the baptism of the Spirit and the filling of the Spirit, and at the meaning of the sealing and anointing of the Spirit. Please pray with me that God will meet us and protect us from error, as we enter the holy of holies, and gaze on God’s glory and grace.

Body

1. What exactly was the promise?

God promised his old covenant community, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:27). When Jesus entered his public ministry, John the Baptist pointed to him and called him both “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” and also “he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (John 1:29&33). After he had given his life and won his victory over sin and death, Jesus repeated this promise, telling his disciples 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” (Act 1:4&5). But that raises the question of just who this promised Holy Spirit is?

2. Who is the Holy Spirit whose coming was promised?

There is, in the Scripture, a growing revelation of this glorious and transcendent God, first revealing himself as the one true God, the sovereign creator of all that is. Yet in the second sentence of the Bible, we read that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Still within the opening chapter of the Bible, we hear God say, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). So from the very first verses of Scripture, the foundation was laid for an understanding of the one God as being a plurality of persons, and as the Scriptures unfold, God reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament, God the Father is at center stage, revealing himself in his creation, in his word spoken through his servants, and especially through his glory revealed in the pillar and cloud that led Israel, and that later took up residence in the Holy of Holies.

In the Gospels, God the Son is center stage, revealing the Father’s glory, and John writes of him, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The Son seeks always to glorify, not himself, but his Father.

In the Acts of the Apostles, beginning at Pentecost, the Spirit of God takes the center stage, also seeking no glory for himself, but seeking rather to glorify the Son, who in turn glorifies the Father. We continue today to live in the age of the Holy Spirit. Truly, it will always be the season of Pentecost until Christ comes again in power and glory, and consummates salvation in the resurrection of his people and the re-creation of the cosmos.

All of this is to say that the great promise fulfilled at Pentecost relates to the coming into human history of the Holy Spirit of God in some way so special and unique that his coming could be promised, anticipated and celebrated with joy and wonder.

3. What is the unique role of the Holy Spirit in this his age?

We cannot in a few minutes this morning even begin to describe the ministries of the Spirit in this present age, but hopefully we can at least provide a framework for understanding the Spirit's work more deeply and of experiencing his presence more powerfully. Let me simply point to two crucial aspects of his ministry to us today:

He is the presence of God in the world today:

As surely as Jesus was God's presence when he walked the earth, and the cloud of glory that filled the Temple was the presence of God to the people of Israel, so God's Spirit is in the world today physically, by living in and through the bodies of believers. So the apostle Paul writes, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). And he is resident in local congregations like this one, as Paul also points out in saying to a local church, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16).

The key theme here is that God's glory be displayed. All of his creation is a display of his glory, but God has created special places throughout history where his glory would be more clearly displayed, in order to distinguish it from all pretenders. This involves a profound call to follow Jesus in his love for the Father, his love for his church, and his love for the world.

He is also the power of God in the world today:

His power convicts the world of its guilt and need of salvation: "When he comes," says Jesus to his disciples, "he will convict the world of guilt concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). And his power enables his people to take up the life and ministry of God in this present age: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).

The key theme here is that God's will be done. Our witness to the truth of the gospel must be in the Spirit's power. We are to make disciples of all nations, and in our own strength we cannot do it. All of our global mission strategies, all of our giving and sending and going are for nothing, if not in the power of God's Spirit.

Conclusion

We have a choice to make at the start of every day and all throughout the day, whether to live according to the flesh or according to the spirit, whether to seek our own will, based upon natural passions and desires, or whether to pursue a life informed by God's Word and empowered by God's Spirit.

From the unsearchable reaches of eternity, beyond the time and space in which we live, the God – in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) – determined to create a cosmos filled with life that would display his glory. Within that cosmos, he determined that there be creatures in his image and likeness, free to know him and love him, knowing all the while that in our freedom we would run from him and reject his love. At great cost to himself and in incomprehensible love he entered that cosmos, conquering our rebellion and the destruction it had triggered. And now he lives within that cosmos by living in those who receive him, who believe in his name, who yield to him their lives and receive the new life of his Spirit.

What of you, at the end of another Easter season and on the cusp of Pentecost? Have you received him? Have you called on his name and asked him to send his Spirit to make his dwelling place in you and to restore to you the purpose for which you were created? His word to us today is the same: “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:7-8).

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