

## “Receiving the Promise”

Joel 2:21-32 • Acts 2:1-24, 32-39

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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A while back there was a man who bought a new car. The car came with a voice warning system. A soft female voice would let him know if his lights were left on or if a door was left open. The voice would remind him if his seatbelt wasn't fastened. One day he discovered that the car had been programmed to warn him when he was low on gasoline. The voice came on and said, “your fuel is low.”

The man figured he had enough gas to go another fifty miles, so he kept on driving. A few minutes later the voice interrupted again with the same warning. Every few minutes he would get the same warning about his fuel. As this went on, the man thought the voice sounded a little harsher each time. Finally he'd had enough of the constant reminders so he pulled over to the side of the road, reached under the dash and removed the fuse for the warning system. “That should end those interruptions,” he thought.

About a mile down the road, just past an exit with a gas station, the car began to sputter and cough and then stalled. He had run out of gas.

I'm willing to bet that there have been times in your life when you've seem to have run out of gas – emotionally, physically, even spiritually. Most of us have had times when life comes crashing down around us and it feels like we just can't go any more. Maybe you lost your job or were in a financial crisis. Maybe your relationship with a family member or close friend fell apart or maybe you were having trouble communicating with your spouse. Wherever it was in your life that you “ran out of gas,” I'll bet that if you really think about it, you'll find that there were warning signs along the way. Every so often you would get the low fuel message but ignored it. That presence in our lives that warns us that something is not right and that we're headed for trouble is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Today is the day in the church year when we celebrate Pentecost. In our passage this

morning we find the followers of Christ gathered in Jerusalem praying when the Holy Spirit comes upon them in a mighty way. It's difficult for us to really know what happened that day because I suspect words are unable to fully describe what happened. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, tells us there was a sound like a mighty rushing wind and there was something that appeared to be like tongues of fire.

More important than the physical phenomenon, he tells us that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and that it was obvious to others. We're told that a crowd gathered and that they were amazed and astonished. When you and I are filled with Christ's Spirit, people notice and when the Holy Spirit fills our worship, people are drawn in to see what's going on. I think this passage can help us better understand the work of the Holy Spirit in the church today and what our response should be, so let's dig in.

The first thing I want us to look at this morning is the day of *Pentecost* itself. As Christians, we tend to think of Pentecost as a Christian celebration of the birth of the Church, and in a sense it is. But notice that our text says, “When the day of Pentecost arrived.” Pentecost was already a long-established Jewish festival mandated by God in the Old Testament. The book of Deuteronomy gives the details of Pentecost, which was called the Festival of Weeks. There were three great Jewish festivals during the year that every male Jew who lived within twenty miles of Jerusalem was required to attend – Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths.

Pentecost occurred in the spring, fifty days after Passover. In fact, the word Pentecost comes from the Greek word for fifty. The purpose of this festival was to bring the firstfruits of the summer wheat harvest to dedicate to the Lord at the Temple. In addition to the harvest, Jewish tradition had associated

Pentecost with covenant renewal and with the giving of law to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Needless to say, the city of Jerusalem was extremely crowded. Verse 5 tells us that the city was filled with devout Jews “from every nation under heaven.” I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the disciples received the Holy Spirit on one of the busiest days of the year in Jerusalem. Before his ascension, Jesus had commanded them to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and now people from the nations that would have been considered the ends of the earth were present in Jerusalem. It seems to me that we look at what God wants us to do for him and we think it’s impossible. These 120 people I’m sure couldn’t imagine how they were going to preach the Gospel to people in all those foreign nations. But when it was time for the followers of Jesus to speak, God had already brought the nations together. He promises the same for us, also.

So the second thing I want us to notice from this passage is *the promise*. When Jesus promised the Spirit to his disciples shortly before his ascension, they would have understood his promise in the light of biblical prophecies about God restoring Israel in the end time. The Jewish people understood themselves to be God’s chosen people, which they interpreted to mean that they were chosen for special honor and privilege among all the nations. But history has not really revealed this special status. As William Barclay said, “History had been for them one long disaster.” So the Jewish people came to understand that God would have to intervene directly and exalt them to the honor they dreamed of. That day when God would exalt Israel became known as the “day of the Lord,” and it was promised by God through a number of the prophets.

Now in Jesus, that day when God would break into history had arrived. When the crowd gathers around the disciples, Peter stands up to speak and he quotes the prophecy of Joel, showing that the manifestation of the Spirit that the people were seeing was proof that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecy.

Verse 39 says, “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.” It’s important to note here that Luke uses “promise” interchangeably with “gift,” “receiving the Spirit,” and “baptizing in the Spirit.” The promise that God makes at Pentecost is that His power, revealed in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, is now bestowed on all His people. In other words, God has fulfilled His Easter promise.

The third thing I want you to see in this passage is *the proclamation*. When the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit it’s not something they keep to themselves. They have to tell others. Just as he does in his Gospel, Luke shows us that the miracle is an occasion for proclaiming. It is an opportunity to share the good news. But the proclamation itself is also a miracle. At Jesus’ crucifixion the disciples had all abandoned Jesus. Peter, who only weeks before could not speak of Christ even to a servant woman at midnight, now is the first to rise and speak boldly in public.

You and I are the same way. It’s only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to speak about the risen Savior. When we experience Christ’s Spirit working in and around us we are moved to point to that work and show others that it’s God working in our world. We are to be witnesses to what Christ is doing among us. And what great news that is for us. You see we don’t convert anyone, only God does that through His Holy Spirit. But He uses you and me to tell the story of Jesus crucified, risen and ascended. That’s our primary mission as a church – to know Christ and to make Him known. Everything else we do must flow out of that mission.

Verse 37 tells us that the people who heard Peter then responded to his message. They said, “what shall we do?” Peter tells them, “repent and be baptized.” We can disagree about the order in which salvation takes place – whether you repent and are saved or you repent because you are saved – but we can’t escape the fact that we must all respond. We must repent of our sins

and be forgiven in Christ. Again, forgiveness is entirely God's work. The ability to repent and the possession of the Spirit are gifts of God.

The fourth and final point I want to make about this passage is *the product*. After Jesus was crucified on the cross, his disciples were devastated. They were bewildered and broken, with their dream gone and their lives shattered. They had run out of gas. Even after Jesus' resurrection the disciples mostly met in secret. But on Pentecost the Holy Spirit changed all of that. God turned hopeless cowards into mighty preachers. The Spirit, once the exotic possession of a prophetic few, is now available to everyone.

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and those who heard them on that Pentecost, the church was formed. Through the Spirit of Christ a community of believers was created and they were given an identity and a mission. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit through the words of the disciples, people were moved to submit their lives to Christ.

And it works the same way today. As you are faithful to share the Scriptures and tell others about what Jesus has done for you, some of them will be moved to respond as the Spirit speaks to them directly. Because none of us is able to follow Christ on our own, He has gathered us into the Church so that in love we can spur one another on to good works. We need each other.

We have been given an incredible power. Through His Holy Spirit we are able to speak to God directly and He is able to direct our thoughts and work directly in our lives. But more often than not He speaks to us through the fellowship of believers. So today I want to encourage you to receive the promise and listen to His voice so he can guide you safely home into His loving arms without running out of gas along the way.

*Amen.*