

6.4.2017 Pentecost, commonly called Whitsunday (Acts 2:1)

The Church year began on the First Sunday in Advent. Together, we walked through the season of Advent looking forward to the celebration of the birth of our Savior on Christmas Day and in eager anticipation of the fulfillment of His promised Second Coming. Following the twelve days of Christmas, we celebrated Epiphany, the glorious manifestation of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World, to the Gentiles. Our journey through the Sundays of Epiphany led us to the season of Lent, where through prayer, fasting, and self-examination we prepared ourselves to walk with our Savior as He fixed His eyes on the Cross. Our year started out strong, but during Holy Week, like the great St. Peter (the Apostle that St. Augustine refers to as “the most blessed Peter... the first of the apostles” [Commentary on John, Tractate 56:1]), we also fell asleep in the garden, denied our Lord, and left Him as He died on the Cross.

After three days of excruciating silence, we arose to the truth on Easter Day that death made a fatal error when it tried to swallow the Son of God, for our Lord burst open the belly of hell and “*by His death*” He destroyed “*him who holds the power of death*” (Hebrews 2:14b). In the Easter season we discovered that God is not only Just, God is Merciful (Psalm 116:5), and through the precious Blood that poured from the side of His only-begotten Son, the sin that so long separated us from Him was cast “*as far as the east is from the west*” (Psalm 103:12). Ten days ago we celebrated the Ascension of our Lord, our Advocate. The One who pleads our case before the Father ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God. Now, this morning, 50 days from Easter, we celebrate Pentecost, a day often referred to as the birthday of Christ’s Church, because it marks the day that Almighty God poured out His Holy Spirit in a miraculous and visible way upon the first Christians.

It’s important to recognize the significance and value of walking together through the different days and seasons of the Church year. For centuries, this ancient, traditional, formally structured means of worship has resonated with Christians in a powerful and deeply inspiring way that helps stir up and cultivate our faith. Much like the seasons of spring, summer, winter, and fall, the Church year is divided into seasons that each have their own mood and emphasis. We all know that the long, hot days of summer have a completely different feel than a cold, winter day, and that budding trees and spring flowers stand in sharp contrast to autumn leaves and the colors of fall. In a similar way, the First Sunday of Advent (the beginning of the Church year) has a completely different mood and emphasis than Pentecost, and the service that takes place on Ash Wednesday (the first day of Lent) is a far cry from what we experience on Easter Day.

Now, if you’re anything like me, when it comes to spring, summer, winter, or fall, you have a favorite season, a time of year that just seems to match your personality, a season you always wish would last a little longer. I remember living in Nevada and meeting many retired couples from Utah and Idaho that had driven south to spend the winter in the desert. These people did their best to make their favorite season last all year long by living the life of a snowbird and

chasing a kind of endless summer. I would suggest many Christians act in the same manner regarding the days and seasons of the Church year. There are those who overlook the significance and value of Advent because their eyes are fixed on Christmas Day, and others who dislike confronting sin, death, and sacrifice in the penitent season of Lent, so they simply fast-forward to the joy of the Resurrection on Easter Day.

I share these thoughts with you this morning to encourage you to do this: Whatever your favorite season may be, wherever you were at in the Church year when you walked through the door this morning, set your own preference aside, for today we celebrate Pentecost. We must be present on this day and in this season, because we don't want to miss the miracles, the message, and the promise of Pentecost. The miracles of our favorite Church seasons are always accompanied by a message of comfort and hope found in the promises of Almighty God. The Christmas miracle that *"a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a Son"* is a message from God and a promise that *"they shall call His name Emmanuel, which means, God with us"* (Matthew 1:23). The Easter miracle of an empty tomb and our risen Lord proclaims the Gospel message that *"God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son,"* and the promise that His Son suffered, and died, and rose again *"to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16). The miracles witnessed on the day of Pentecost, the *"sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind,"* the *"cloven tongues like as of fire,"* (Acts 2:2-3) declare an unimaginable message from Almighty God, the promise that His Holy Spirit lives in us.

At Christmas we celebrate the promise that God is with us, at Easter the promise that God is for us, and at Pentecost the promise that God is in us, but when the first Christians gathered together on this day, they met to celebrate a different miracle, message, and promise. They met on what we call the day of Pentecost, as the Jewish people do every year, to celebrate the fiftieth day after Passover, the day that marks Moses giving the Law to the people of God at Mount Sinai. Imagine for a moment all that they gathered to celebrate, picture the miracles at Mount Sinai: the LORD God descending in a cloud and standing with Moses (Exodus 34:5), the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets by the finger of God (Exodus 31:18, 34:1), the skin on Moses' face shining so brightly after fasting on the mountain in the presence of God for 40 days and 40 nights (Exodus 34: 28-29) that he wore a veil, for the children of Israel couldn't *"behold the face of Moses"* because of the glory of his countenance (2 Corinthians 3:7). These miracles are far beyond comprehension, yet they are eclipsed by these words spoken by Almighty God: *"Behold, I make a covenant: before all thy people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among which thou art shall see the work of the LORD"* (Exodus 34:10).

The first Christians met to pray, worship, and celebrate these incredible blessings, but what began as a gathering to honor the past, transformed the future of mankind forever. When we reflect on the Old Testament miracle of God descending in a cloud and dwelling among His

covenant people, it doesn't seem possible that it could get any better, but it does. Pentecost is a wonderful example of how the types and shadows of the Old Covenant are fulfilled and perfected in the New Covenant through Person and work of Jesus Christ. The Cross changes everything. Sin has always been the great barrier between us and God, and at the time of the Old Covenant, due to sin there was separation, God dwelled *among* His people. He dwelled *in* the Tabernacle and later *in* the Temple, but at Pentecost, and since that day, God no longer dwells among us, but by the power of His Holy Spirit, through the precious Blood that was shed for our forgiveness, God lives in each one of us.

On the day of Pentecost, these Christians "*were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance*" (Acts 2:4). The Church Father, St. John Chrysostom, reminds us that it wasn't just the twelve that were filled with the Holy Ghost, but the hundred and twenty that were gathered together (Homily 4 – Acts). The Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Church, He moved into the lives of every early Christian empowering them for the purpose Jesus had assigned to them: to be His witnesses. He had said, "*... ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth*" (Acts 1:8b). Our epistle describes a scene where every believer is so empowered by the Holy Spirit that they immediately begin to speak in various languages about the wonderful works of God accomplished through our Lord and Savior. This is a stunning example of Christians fulfilling God's purpose by His power.

We need to ask ourselves: Do we want the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and in the Church in this same manner? Do we believe that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8), and that our Omnipotent God can move in our lives in a miraculous way? If we believe that He can, have we asked Him to? This is the day of Pentecost. We've received the Christmas promise that God is with us. We've been to the Calvary and know that God is for us. Now is the time to pray "*take not thy Holy Spirit from us*" (Psalm 51). We need the constant presence of His Holy Spirit, for God has made this declaration: "*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit*" (Zechariah 4:6). We must begin every day by submitting to the direction and the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), for if God does not use us, nothing we do will be useful. So, let's refuse to get comfortable in our favorite Church season or complacent in our spiritual lives, for on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was not poured out on a select few, but upon the Church, upon every member of the Body of Christ. Today, all the power of the Maker of heaven and earth, the Omnipotent King of Kings, lives in you.