June 8, 2025
Acts 2:1-21

One thing I love about the Old Testament Jews is this: they love to party. In all seriousness, God mandated certain festivals in the Old Testament, and they were taken very seriously- but they were also times of joy, celebration, and feasting. The festivals were mandatory fun- especially the "Festival of the Firstfruits" or "Pentecost-" called that because it was fifty days after the Passover festival. This was celebrated as the firstfruits of the grain harvest were being collected, and they would offer their firstfruits of their harvest to God and have a feast together in Jerusalem. This was a festival of food, but also a festival of biblical instruction. The priests and religious teachers at this time would read the Old Testament- it would be like a catechism review for everyone there. That may have been what all the disciples and followers of Jesus were doing at this time. It says they were in a place- but we're not sure where that would be. It's possible they were in someone's house, or perhaps one of the many large rooms in the temple for religious instruction, or just near the temple- it's hard to say. And it's at this moment, when believers in God from all over the Ancient world, modern day Egypt and Northern Africa, Iraq, Italy, Syria, Turkey, Crete- a Greek Island, Saudi Arabia, and more, people from all these different places, gathered to listen to the Word of God. And that's exactly what happened, and so much more. God, just for a few moments, reversed the curse of Babel- when human beings decided they were erect a tower to worship themselves, and God mixes up their language, and now God brings all these different languages together as they worship him. This is considered the birth of the New Testament church. This is one of the most important, most powerful, most remarkable things we hear about in the Bible. This is Pentecost. And you may be wondering along with those listeners, "What does this mean?" This is what Pentecost means: **1. Power, 2. Prophecy, and 3. Perspective.**

1. Power. When I taught at a boys high school in Milwaukee, there were many students and even workers who called themselves "Pentecostal." Perhaps you've heard of them- it's a flavor of Christianity which really emphasizes the Work of the Holy Spirit (we do too), but assumes that the Holy Spirit works specifically through tongue speaking and miracles and without those, the Spirit is not present. I remember one conversation I had with a worker at the school, and he said we Lutherans didn't really have the Holy Spirit. I asked why he thought that, and he said, "You guys don't tell people to make a decision for Christ. Yeah, you tell them about Jesus, but you have to invite the Spirit into your heart to truly receive him." Is that true? Does God the Holy Spirit need our permission to work powerfully in and among us? Well, did the disciples ask and beg the Holy Spirit to come work in and through them? Were they chanting, singing, dancing, inviting the Spirit to come? No. They were just sitting, possibly reading the Bible together and praying, but nothing particularly remarkable. It's not like they had to hit the right spiritual buttons in order to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was the one who came on his own accord. And when he did, he made it very obvious. Great, powerful wind was often a sign of the presence of God in the Old Testament, as well as fire. And the Spirit gave them the ability to be

heard in all different kinds of languages- the native languages of all the people who were gathered there. You see, most people in the ancient world were bilingual or even trilingual. They spoke their native language, but they also spoke the common language of the larger region, in this case, Greek. And they marveled and even believed what they heard, and about 3000 people came to believe in Jesus that day! So, who gets the credit for that? Do the disciples and others with them get credit? *Do the people who converted get credit for coming to faith? No. Look at what we said today- We cannot by our own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus or come to him.* Sometimes, I hear Christians say things like "When I chose Christ" or "Make one's decision for Christ," but that's really not biblically accurate. Human beings, according to the Bible, are inherently sinful and absolutely unable, and, frankly, unwilling to love or trust God. The only way a Christian can become a Christian, think like a Christian, trust in God like a Christian, and remain a Christian, is the work and power of the Holy Spirit. That's what Pentecost clearly teaches us- everything we have and everything we are is because of the Holy Spirit. Yes, Jesus Christ died for our sins, and his blood has absolutely taken all our guilt away- but the only way we could ever believe or want the forgiveness that Jesus offers is if the Holy Spirit causes us to believe in the first place. We are saved by faith- and the Holy Spirit is the one who grants faith. My friends- all of us are miracles, just as miraculous as the converts on the day of Pentecost. Through the Gospel- the good news of what Jesus has done for us spoken through a pastor, a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, a friend, the Holy Spirit has called each of us to faith and continues to keep us in God's arms. Everything in God's church is a miracle. Every time someone repents of a sin, every time someone wants to serve, every time someone gives a generous gift, every time someone is moved by the Word of God- it's because the Holy Spirit is at work. And the Holy Spirit works within us not only because he loves us, but for a purpose.

2. Prophecy. I mentioned Luther and the Reformation before, and how through Luther the Holy Spirit changed hearts and minds to receive and trust the true Gospel of Jesus, that we are saved by Jesus' blood alone through faith in Jesus' blood alone. In a medieval church era where it was all about what *you* were doing for God (never enough), Christians were filled with joy and comfort when they discovered that Christianity is primarily about what *God* has done for you, the Father chose you to be his child, the Son paid for all your sins, and the Spirit created faith in you to trust in Jesus. We are children of that Reformation, and you've likely noticed that the Gospel is the center of what we do- the most important thing we can talk about here is not all the wonderful things you can do for God, but what God has done for you. All true- but here's the issue. Even during Luther's day, there were some people that wanted to focus on the Gospel, but only talk about the Gospel and not even mention what God has created his people for. Luther talks about these pastors like this: *They are fine Easter preachers, but shamefully poor Pentecost preachers, for they preach nothing concerning sanctification by the Holy Spirit, but preach only about redemption by Christ, though Christ, Whom they extol so highly (and rightly so!). He has purchased redemption from sin and death, in order that the Holy Spirit shall make new men of us, in place of the old Adam, so that we die unto sin and live unto righteousness.* This is what we are seeing in Pentecost- God takes these sinners whom he has forgiven, and he equips them for a

new life of service- specifically- to be prophets. Look at what they are doing- they are proclaiming the wonders of God and are being understood by all these people. They are preaching the Gospel of Jesus- that God has come down and has died for sinners, and all who trust in him will be saved forever. And there's a bit of a mixed reaction- some are bewildered, many believe, and some are oddly cynical and laugh it off: "They're drunk!" Which makes one ask the question- why would they specifically say "drunk?" Do drunk people speak languages they don't know? It's not just they are speaking different languages, but the joy and lack of fear with which they are doing it- fearlessly going up to people and telling them about Jesus with joy. What is this? Peter spells it out- it's the promise God gave to his Old Testament people through the prophet Joel: a time is coming when the Holy Spirit won't just work through one specific prophet, but through men and women, young and old- that they are going to proclaim things that God has revealed to them- not in dreams, but in the Bible- in his Word.

This is vitally important for us to understand. Each of us has a ministry. Often, we say a pastor has a ministry, which is true. But really, all of us have a Christian ministry- some of us just aren't good at anything else so we do Christian ministry full time. You each have a Christian ministry, people or a person that God has called you to share Jesus with. Maybe it's your husband, or children, your friends, or your neighbor. You are each prophets. Consider this- the tongues of fire- what does that remind you of? The burning bush! Moses saw the fire in the bush, but the bush didn't burn up and God used that to speak to Moses. Each of those Christians were like a burning bush- the Holy Spirit dwelling within them to communicate his Gospel, and therefore save all kinds of people. That's what Christians are- vessels filled with the Holy Spirit that God uses to bring people into his family forever. Therefore- Pentecost gives us a new perspective on church- what it is and what its mission is.

3. Perspective. Over the past two years, I've gotten to have a lot of conversations with retired pastors, and I always get something good out of those conversations. Two conversations really stick out to me. The first one was more than a year ago with a man about to retire from a church in this area, not Lutheran, and he was constantly complaining about his people- their apathy and laziness, and he mentioned that he was a Freemason. I asked, "You're a Freemason- a group that explicitly denies the claims of the Bible about God? And you're a Christian pastor? How does that work?" And he said, "Well, the Masons, the Church, they're just both old, dying clubs." I don't think it's a coincidence that a pastor who had a very low view of the Bible, a low view of the Gospel, a low view of God's power to change hearts and souls (and doesn't really see a need for that), also has a shockingly low view of his church. He was right- an old dying- now dead- club. If a church doesn't work to share its message, not only will it shrink, they will begin to doubt that the message is even worth sharing, and at that point the church is no longer a church, but a club, whose entire goal is to sustain its own existence- why? Because the songs are pretty and that's where my friends are and my mom was buried here. Pentecost means that the church is not an old, dying club, but a family of people called out of darkness into Christ's light and bearers of that light which will be shared with others. This church is not an old, dying, club. We

are God's people called by grace, filled with the Spirit, each of us with unique, beautiful gifts to serve each other in love and share the precious joy we have. Here's another perspective. A few weeks ago I was speaking to another young pastor, whose father had retired from being a pastor, but recently went back to being a pastor, and when his son asked, "why," his dad replied: "Life here is so short. Eternity is so long and glorious. What do I have to lose? Even if I don't convert anyone, what's lost- God is still working! Sure, I might have to say some challenging things to people, and perhaps they'll make fun of me. What do I have to lose?" That is what I call a Pentecostal perspective.

I know many of you are starting to share your faith with your friends, your relatives, even your spouses. And I know many of you want to, but are wrestling with how to say the right thing. That's a beautiful thing, and I want to encourage you: What do you have to lose? Heaven is yours because of Jesus- you're not losing that! God's favor rests on you- so your self-worth and esteem aren't at risk! Continue to grow, continue to have to those conversations, continue to invite, continue to listen, continue to study, continue to pray that God's kingdom would come and more and more would come into Jesus' arms. That's why we're here. Amen.