

SERMON TITLE: "Holy Spirit of Hope"  
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:1-24 and Isaiah 29:1-12  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: June 4, 2017, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many of you have heard me say this before, but I think it's worth repeating. I believe that Pentecost is the most important Christian holiday. What?! Yes, the most important. Hear me out. What if Jesus were born at Christmas, but no one told anyone about it? Or, what if Jesus died and rose again at Easter, and no one spoke the good news? We are Christians today because those early disciples, and generations of believers ever since, felt the power of Pentecost. And the only way we will successfully continue to transmit Christian faith to our children and neighbors is through this Holy Spirit of hope.

### **1—TRADITIONAL TEACHING ABOUT PENTECOST**

The traditional teaching about Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit of hope empowered the disciples to overcome their loss of Jesus. The Jewish festival of Pentecost was only 50 days after Passover. It had only been seven weeks since Jesus was brutally whipped and executed and their spiritual leader had been taken from them. Yes, some disciples had seen Jesus in post-resurrection appearances, but all that was over now. Jesus had ascended to heaven, and they were left to figure out what to do next. That's why 120 or so followers of Jesus met together in Jerusalem, during the Pentecost festival.

Acts 2 tells us that, as the followers of Jesus were gathered together in one place, the Holy Spirit came upon them with wind, fire, and visions—not to mention the ability to speak in foreign languages. The disciples who had previously been living in fear that they might be crucified like Jesus, now, miraculously, gained courage to speak aloud the wonders of God's resurrection power. They might not be able to see Jesus anymore, but he clearly was with them through the Holy Spirit. The sad disciples gained exuberance. Language barriers were overcome, and the message of Christ was communicated to people of every nation.

As Acts 2:41 tells us, Jewish festival-goers were responsive to this Holy Spirit of hope. About 3000 repented of their sins, were baptized, and began living as devoted followers of Jesus.

This traditional understanding about Pentecost is wonderful because it gives us the hope that, even today, the Holy Spirit is able to overcome our grief, our fears, and our limitations. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, our lives can be transformed by repentance, grace, and dreams for the future. We can receive power and courage to communicate this good news with others when we, ourselves, are filled with the Holy Spirit of hope.

### **2—ANOTHER THOUGHT—FROM ISAIAH 29**

That's the way Pentecost has traditionally been understood, and it is a wonderful teaching. But I want to share an additional thought with you today. A couple weeks ago, as I was reading my way through the Old Testament book of Isaiah, I came across chapter 29. Of course, I had read that chapter many times before. But, this time—maybe because Pentecost was coming soon—I was struck by the imagery of that chapter. I was amazed at how much Isaiah 29 sounded like the story of Pentecost.

In case you didn't catch that similarity when Charles read it, let me review. If this sermon were a movie with a flashback, this is where you'd see the words, "730 years earlier . . ."

In Isaiah 29, the historical context was the near collapse of Jerusalem to the Assyrian army. In the year 701 BCE, Assyrian forces surrounded and attacked the city of Jerusalem. Both biblical and Assyrian records indicate that the situation got pretty dire and that Judah's King Hezekiah had to pay a huge sum of tribute to gain relief.

In the first few verses of Isaiah 29, the prophet had warned that outside forces would besiege and attempt to destroy their temple and capital stronghold. It didn't matter, said Isaiah, that the Jewish people had come to Jerusalem year after year for their annual religious celebrations and sacrifices. What good were burnt offerings, if the people disobeyed God in other ways? In a play on words, the prophet may have been saying that, like an altar hearth, the whole city of Jerusalem would soon be burning.

But even as the prophet painted a desperate picture of a besieged city on fire, he began to raise a tiny bit of hope. “Then,” he said, “your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and your speech shall whisper out of the dust.” The city that had been dead would come alive. And then, Jerusalem’s enemies were the ones who would become like dust, because, “in an instant, suddenly, the Lord of hosts will come with thunder and earthquake and . . . whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.” Jerusalem’s enemies would be gone as if they had been only a fleeting dream.

Unfortunately, said Isaiah, the people of Jerusalem didn’t seem to understand this prophetic message. The prophet chastised them because they were blind and drunk. “Be drunk,” he wrote, “but not from wine!” For some reason, what Isaiah saw in his vision was impossible for the other prophets to see and read. It was as if “the Lord has poured out upon [them] a spirit of deep sleep.”

If we had read to the end of the chapter, we would have heard some hope for the Jews of Jerusalem. They wouldn’t always be in a stupor. Eventually, said Isaiah, “the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.” The injustices of the land will be set straight, “and those who err in spirit will come to understanding.”

### **3—COMPARISON & APPLICATION**

Do you hear the imagery of Pentecost in that story? Or, in a more accurate historical order—do you hear the imagery of Isaiah 29 in the Pentecost story? Annual religious festivals, fire, great noise, and wind; drunk, but not from wine; and a spirit poured out upon the people, that will give vision and understanding. Those elements of Isaiah are all present in Acts 2. Is that a coincidence? I don’t think so. The Jews and Christians of the first century were well-acquainted with the Old Testament. The vocabulary and imagery of those writings was the native language in which they dreamed their dreams. It was how God spoke to them. It was how the Holy Spirit came to them.

The book of Acts was written at the end of the first century. The historical situation then wasn't so very different from what Isaiah was talking about. In the year 70, the Romans had besieged and actually destroyed Jerusalem. All that was holy and secure for the Jews had tumbled down, and Jews and Jewish Christians had fled for their lives and scattered throughout the Mediterranean region. When the book of Acts was written, the surviving people of God were still reeling from post-traumatic stress. They were refugees. They were immigrants. Their homes were gone. Their temple was in rubble. Many of their friends, relatives, and leaders were dead. Their future was uncertain. They were grieving, impoverished, and sad. Where would they go? What would they do? How would they practice their faith? What would they even believe? In whom could they trust?

As I compare these two scriptures, I'm confident that the story of Pentecost was intended as a giant spiritual pep talk. It was a way of saying, "Hey, this isn't the only time our holy city was besieged and destroyed. We've been through this before. This isn't the end of the world as we know it. Our voice will rise up out of the dust."

I think the author of Acts was trying to reinterpret extremely painful events to show how God was at work. Think of it like this. Why do we have fireworks on the Fourth of July? For a happy celebration, right? But the origin of that fire in the sky was "the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air."\* Even in ancient times, fire was a major weapon of battle. By having beautiful fireworks shows on the Fourth of July, we essentially revisit and reinterpret the horrors of war and proclaim our victory over oppressive powers that might have destroyed us.

The same is true in Acts 2. Just as we've always been taught, the Holy Spirit came with power on the disciples of Jesus who were gathered in Jerusalem. But the power they received was a new understanding. Jesus' death and absence from them had to be overcome, yes, for sure. But it was more than that. As the Pentecost story was written down decades later, the very destruction of God's sacred place and people had to be overcome, as well. The only way that could happen was to reinterpret the

situation, to see God's hand positively and intentionally at work in what had occurred. It wasn't the Roman army who sent the fire upon Jerusalem. It was God. It wasn't wine that caused the disciples to speak with exuberance. It was God. It wasn't the occupation of the Roman army and the displacement of war that gave Galileans the ability to speak in foreign languages. It was God. It was God's Holy Spirit of hope.

## **CONCLUSION**

What happened at Pentecost was an incredible breakthrough of understanding. If you don't believe me, spend the next month reading all the chapters of the book of Acts. You could call it the second "Big Bang." In the first big bang, neutrons, electrons, protons, and all kinds of sparks flew in every direction and there was a catalytic conversion of creation. In the Pentecost big bang, the people of God were blown out of Jerusalem into the Mediterranean world with a similarly catalytic conversion experience that created the church. In chapter after chapter of Acts, Christian disciples were on the move to new cities and provinces and countries. Beside rivers, along roads, in Jewish synagogues, in house churches, and outside temples to unknown Gods, the missionaries for Christ shared a message of hope that caught on like fire.

In this Pentecost story, the writer of Acts is saying, "Look here, people now scattered from Jerusalem! You may have thought that the Roman destruction of Jerusalem was the end of all things holy and good. In the carnage, the grief, and the displacement, you may have thought that the end times had come and that your life was over. But it's not true. The Holy Spirit of God has come again among you. Once again, God's Spirit is speaking to your spirit. Once again, God is giving you visions for your future.

Today is the time for us to claim this Pentecost experience, as well. Some in our community have experienced the trauma of war and combat, and many of us have had other brutal experiences. Maybe we have a need to reinterpret the pain. Time after time, God stirs people to life again. No matter how bad our situation seems, God can give us a new understanding. This Pentecost message is for us and for us to share with others: We can receive the Holy Spirit of hope.

\*Francis Scott Key, "The Star-Spangled Banner." He wrote these lyrics in 1814, after he witnessed the bombardment of Ft. McHenry during the War of 1812.