

SERMON TITLE: "Filled with the Holy Spirit"

SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:1-21

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: May 20, 2018 (Pentecost & Confirmation Sunday) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

My husband Steve has been watching a lot of basketball lately. That's gotten me to remembering those long-ago days when I would go to my high school gym to watch the Libby Loggers playing. During any breaks in the action, the cheerleaders would raise enthusiasm with a variety of chants.

A particular cheer divided the hometown crowd into two parts. One side would begin by saying, "We've got the spirit. Yes, we do. We've got the spirit. How about you?" Then the other side would return the cheer: "We've got the spirit. Yes, we do. We've got the spirit. How about you?" That call and response could go back and forth several times, winding up the audience and making a lot of noise on behalf of our team. Because we wanted our Libby Loggers to score some points, we all needed to get filled with the spirit.

That's kind of what was happening in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. On one side of the court were the religious leaders who had crucified Jesus. By inflicting fouls and injuries, they hoped to silence his followers. On the other side were Jesus' close circle of disciples, plus other believers. With God as their cheerleader, these Christians began making quite a ruckus. Before the Day of Pentecost was over, Team Jesus had made tremendous gains in the score of those repenting of their sins and accepting Jesus Christ as their Messiah and Savior. All this came about because the disciples and their friends were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Like I told the kids, Pentecost is well-known as the birthday of the church. It was the day the church was born. But Pentecost is more than a story about the past. It's also a promise for us today. Let's take a look at the story in Acts and see how we too can be filled with the Holy Spirit.

1—ALL TOGETHER

According to the Pentecost story, the first way that we can be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be all together. Acts 2:1 indicates that, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” Who were these people gathered all together? Well, if we look at the previous chapter, Acts one, we see references to the original twelve disciples minus Judas. We read that there were also some women, including Jesus’ mother. Jesus’ brothers were there too, plus other Christian believers, totaling about 120 people. The particular people were important, no doubt. But what was more important is that they were there all together. These followers of Jesus had been instructed not to leave Jerusalem, but to stay there, waiting for the promised Holy Spirit.

Those of you who have read and studied the Bible know that the biblical writers had different understandings, perspectives, and purposes for writing. Thus, the Gospel of Matthew indicates that the disciples met up with the risen Jesus on a mountain in Galilee. And the Gospel of John says that the disciples were out fishing on the Sea of Tiberias when they saw the risen Jesus cooking breakfast for them on the beach. But, according to the Luke-Acts tradition, the disciples didn’t go anywhere. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, they kept vigil right there in Jerusalem, in a crowded upper room. It was there, in Jerusalem, that they saw the risen Christ ascend to heaven. It was there in Jerusalem that they carried out the business of electing a new disciple, Matthias, to replace Judas. It was there, all together, that they devoted themselves to prayer. An important reason the Holy Spirit came upon them with miraculous power at Pentecost was that the believers had spent 50 days all together, coming to one mind about Jesus, united in their hopes and expectations for the future.

It’s common these days to hear folks say that they don’t need to attend church to be a Christian. People like to say that they’re “spiritual, but not religious.” They think they can have an adequate relationship with God without all the bother of other people. But the message of Pentecost is that the greatest power of our faith comes when we are assembled in a group, singing the same hymn, reciting

the same creed, and praying the same prayer. When we are gathered all together in one purpose, that's when we gain the strength of faith to put us on track and keep us on track as Christians. When we're focused together on Christ, that's when we find our moral anchor, which helps us be good and decent people. Living as a Christian isn't easy. It takes a lot of energy and determination to really follow the teachings of Christ. Rarely do we have enough of those resources on our own.

Now that summer is almost here, we can easily think of a campfire. If you have a little piece of wood burning alone, the fire will go out quickly. If you want to keep a fire burning, you have to keep putting more wood on it, and keep the burning parts together. Likewise, as Christians, we need to get fueled up and filled up by the Holy Spirit, and that flame comes to us best when we are gathered all together.

2—PRAYING

A second reason the Holy Spirit was able to come with miraculous power on the Day of Pentecost was that the believers had been busy praying. We see this in Acts 1:14, which says that the believers "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer." They weren't gathered together just to have a big party and socialize. They weren't even gathered just to make decisions and conduct business. Yes, they did some of all that. But their primary reason for being all together was to worship God and to fulfill their calling as disciples of Jesus. And, so, they encouraged each other in the faith by lifting up the fledgling Christian community in prayer. They sought God's will and direction, and they yearned for God's strength. They joined their hearts and minds in praises and petitions to God.

We get together with groups of people for lots of different reasons. We play games. We debate community issues. We do our jobs. We learn in a class. We discuss sports. We plan for the future. We share a meal with friends. We catch up on developments in the family. We work in the church yard. We attend a concert or play. In a couple weeks, we'll even sort and sell rummage for a fundraiser to help the needy. All those activities are fine and good. But, if we want to be filled with the Holy Spirit,

then the most important thing we can do together is open lines of communication with God. When we pour out our hearts together, and when we seek God's response together, that's when God's power will come. We'll be filled with the Holy Spirit when we've been all together, praying.

3—CLAIM & SHARE OUR MIRACLES

If we want to be filled with the Holy Spirit, a third thing we must do is claim and share our miracles. For those believers present on that first Day of Pentecost, their miracle included violent wind, tongues of fire, and speaking in different languages. Some people think that we have to have those very same miraculous elements today in order to claim that we are filled with the Holy Spirit. Probably the most common Pentecostal experience is speaking in tongues. Many of us know of someone who claims and tells about this aspect of their Christian faith.

And some Christians have had fiery experiences. For example, the Apostle Paul got struck and blinded by a bright light that miraculously changed his faith and life. In the 1500s, the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther also had a lightning experience that caused him to promise God that, if he survived the storm, he would become a priest. In 1708, when John Wesley was five years old, his family's house caught on fire, and little Johnny had to be rescued out of a second story window. Afterwards, his mother taught him that he was "a brand, plucked from the burning" because God had a special plan for his life. Even in my last church, there was a lady named Linda, who told me that a lightning strike that burned up her dishwasher woke her up to her need for salvation. Through the fire, all those people sensed that God was sending them a miraculous and Holy Spirit kind of message.

But our miracle doesn't have to include foreign languages or fire. My Holy Spirit miracle had to do with a scholarship and a beer. When I was a senior in high school, I had my heart set on attending a certain Christian college that would have been much more expensive than a state university. At that time, my dad didn't attend church or have any Christian faith. He didn't understand why I would want to go so far from home and spend so much money to attend a Christian college.

But then one evening, I was in my bedroom filling out the application for a full-tuition scholarship to that college. My dad stopped in the doorway of my room and asked me what I was doing. I told him. Dad laughed. He couldn't image that I could win a scholarship that big. So he joked and said, "Kim, if you win that scholarship, I'll buy you a big beer." I told him that I didn't want a beer, but if I won the scholarship he could go to church with me. Dad said he would. "In fact," he said, "if you win that big scholarship, I'll go twice." I hurried to get a piece of paper, wrote down what he said, and made him sign it.

A couple months later, when I found out that I had won the scholarship, I dug out the paper my dad had signed, showed it to him, and my dad went to church—two Sundays in a row. It didn't change him immediately. But it was a beginning step that, over the next few years, led my dad to his own personal and dedicated faith in Jesus Christ. So, I claim that scholarship as my miraculous, Holy Spirit event. The Holy Spirit came to me, opened the way for my dad to become a Christian, and set me on the path of training for Christian ministry.

I suspect that there's something in your faith journey that you could claim and share as your Pentecost miracle too. When was it that you felt the Holy Spirit come? When did you get turned around or sense that God was charging up your faith? When did you get excited about Christ? When did you receive empowerment for sharing the gospel with someone? Think about what it was. Your experience doesn't have to be like anyone else's. You just need to claim and share it as your Pentecost miracle, when you were filled with the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

If you think really hard and can't come up with a Pentecost miracle of your own, then don't forget what I said earlier about getting all together and praying. One of my favorite Christian singers and songwriters is Ken Medema. A number of years ago, he recorded a song that goes like this:

Lord, listen to your children praying.

Lord, send your Spirit in this place.
Lord, listen to your children praying.
Send us love, send us power, send us grace. (c. 1970)

If the children of God will get together and pray, there's no telling what kind of power the Lord might send. You never know, we just might be filled with the Holy Spirit.