

The Lord is Near

Acts 2:1–21; Philippians 4:4–7

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I have something of a confession to make. Of all the days and seasons of the Christian calendar, Pentecost is often the one that I get least excited about.

During Advent, we practice the necessary disciplines of repentance, preparation, longing for the coming of Christ, both as a child in a manger and as the risen and exalted Lord of history.

At Christmas, we celebrate the Incarnation. God in human flesh, the most unlikely thing! The Author of the Grand Story of Creation and Re-Creation, descending to join the story as one of the characters. God's decisive act in history, to redeem humanity from the inside.

Epiphany is where we celebrate the revelation of Jesus as the savior of the world, not just the Jewish people.

During the season of Lent, we again enter a season of penitence and fasting as we approach Holy Week.

Then there is Holy Week itself, where we walk with Jesus from Palm Sunday to the cross, where we see humanity as we truly are and the depths of God's love as he truly is.

Of course there is Easter Sunday! The glory of resurrection, the triumph of life over death. The highlight of the Christian year, the very epicenter of the Christian faith.

And, as Heather mentioned last Sunday, as we get closer to the end of the fifty day season of Easter, we remember the Ascension.

This is a day we don't tend to make much of but probably should. Jesus moves from being bound by time and space to being present everywhere as the risen and exalted King who rules and reigns from on high. Which is kind of important.

Each one of these seasons and days is very Jesus-y. They're *all* about Jesus. His humanity, his divinity, his suffering, his death and resurrection, his promised return, his lordship.

I like talking about Jesus (probably a good thing in my line of work!). I find him beautiful and compelling in countless ways. I love the stories he told, the ways in which he interacted with people. His suffering moves me. His mercy inspires and humbles me. His priorities turn me upside down and set me the right way up. I could go on and on about Jesus.

(Some of you are probably thinking, “yeah, we *know...*”) 😊

And then we have Pentecost. Perhaps the least Jesus-y of all the dates on the Christian calendar. At Pentecost, we talk about the Holy Spirit and about the church.

We don't always find it easy to talk about the Holy Spirit as Anabaptists, do we?

Perhaps we associate the Holy Spirit with “other Christians” who worship in wild and charismatic ways.

Perhaps we think of emotional expressions of piety instead of the more cerebral and buttoned-down forms that we prefer.

Perhaps we think of the Holy Spirit as something for the super-spiritual Christians who do things (or *claim* to do things) that less “Spirit-filled” Christians cannot do.

We're not always sure what to make of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in his career, my brother Gil (who will be moving back to Alberta this summer) taught at a small bible college in Saskatchewan.

I always looked forward to exam-marking season because Gil would send me some of the more entertaining answers and responses from his students.

One of my favourites over the years was one that must have come from a theology class on the Holy Spirit:

I believe that the Holy Spirit also has strong ability to take over a person or give them ability that can only be described as divine. These can be things such as

superhuman strength, ability to part waters, ability to transform one object into another, or healing ability.

Sounds kind of like something out of a Marvel movie!

But I wonder how far from the truth this is when it comes to many popular understandings of the Holy Spirit, inside and outside the church.

God the Father, we get.

Jesus, we get. *We love.*

But the Spirit? Well, we're not always so sure.

And the church? Well, the church *can* be inspiring. But also, not.

The church at its best is of course a beautiful thing! Every tribe and tongue united at Pentecost, a community formed and sent out to the ends of the earth to proclaim the good news of Jesus. And the church turned loose at Pentecost has been an overwhelming force for good in our world.

But church history has of course been characterized by plenty of conflict and disunity and majoring on minors and minoring on majors and flat-out getting things wrong. Many people have not had positive experiences of the church. I talk to them often.

After Pentecost, it's Ordinary Time until Advent comes around again in late November and we can start telling the story of Jesus again.

And sometimes the church can feel... kinda ordinary. We blunder along, doing our best, having our good moments and bad moments, sometimes representing Jesus well, sometimes not so much.

Sometimes we may be tempted to think, "you know, Jesus, maybe it wasn't such a great idea to leave your message with fallen, broken, selfish people and institutions!"

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Jesus, it would seem, disagrees. And the other side of any issue from Jesus is not a great place to find oneself.

Pentecost was and is a crucially important day in Christian year and in the Christian life!

Let's look briefly at the Pentecost story from the second chapter of Acts,

The disciples are waiting and expectant in Jerusalem, just as Jesus commanded them in Luke 24.

And suddenly we have this spectacular imagery of tongues of fire resting upon the people, of strange and unexpected languages proclaiming God's deeds of power.

We see Peter interpreting the event for those present, linking the descent of the Spirit with ancient prophecies from the book of Joel.

We see the Spirit giving birth to the church.

It's a powerful text with powerful imagery. The Spirit's movement among the people comes via wind and fire!

This may not be welcome imagery for many of us! Those of us who have spent any length of time in southern Alberta have perhaps made a grudging peace with the wind, but it's not something any of us particularly enjoy.

For me, wind means earaches and not being able to play tennis or pickle ball and picking up garbage that blows against my fence and into my front yard.

And what about fire? Well, we might think of warm campfires on cool evenings and wiener roasts and the pleasures of time spent outdoors.

But there's also forest fires, which we hear a lot about each summer (and which we are less than a decade removed from in Waterton Park!).

Wind and fire often mean destruction and disruption. They are examples of threats in our world, of that which cannot be controlled or contained.

In Scripture, though, wind and fire are symbols of God's presence and activity.

God reveals himself to Moses in a burning bush (Ex. 3:1-2) and later descends upon Mt. Sinai in smoke and fire to continue the conversation (Ex. 19:18).

The prophet Isaiah writes that the Lord will “come in fire and his chariots like the whirlwind” (Is. 66:15-16).

Paul encourages the church in Thessalonica to be patient in their suffering for Christ will “be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire” (2 Thess. 1:7-8).

In Ezekiel, we see the prophet transported in a vision to a valley of dry bones and hearing, “Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (Ez. 37:9).

And Jesus himself, in John 3, says, “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

Wind and fire.

Sometimes, they symbolize judgment. Sometimes they symbolize a dramatic encounter with God. Sometimes they are divine means of purification. Sometimes they are part of visions of the future. Sometimes they are symbols of punishment. Sometimes they are symbols of life.

Almost always, wind and fire are symbols of God interrupting the story in a surprising way, taking things in a new direction.

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Now, I’m going to go out on a limb and guess that most of us have never experienced God in ways quite as dramatic as tongues of fire and a violent wind.

This story may sound strange, even weird to our ears. This was an utterly unique experience in God’s grand story of salvation.

So, what does this extraordinary story have to say to us as we head out into ordinary time?

What does the Spirit have to say to us as we walk through the door of Pentecost, as we give thanks for the Spirit and for the church the Spirit has given birth to?

I was initially puzzled by the pairing of our two Scripture readings this morning. Why would the creators of our worship resources choose the passage from Philippians, I wondered? It's not among the usual readings for Pentecost Sunday.

Acts 2: Extraordinary.

Philippians 4: Kind of ordinary.

And yet, as I pondered it this week and even as I heard it read this morning, I thought, this—*this!*—is what a Spirit-filled life looks like. This is what a life conformed to the image of Christ looks like (which is, after all, among the Spirit's most important roles!).

Joy. Gentleness. The absence of anxiety. Lives of prayer and gratitude.

The promise that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, whatever may befall us.

I don't know about you, but when I hear that list, I think, "That's what I want people to see when they look at me. At our church." That's what a community indwelt by the Spirit of the living God ought to look like!

And tucked away in the midst of all of Paul's exhortations are four little words. *The Lord is near* (4:5).

This, ultimately, is the promise of Pentecost. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we can know that the Lord is near. The Spirit of the Risen Christ can be present to all people across time and space in a way that he couldn't during his earthly ministry.

As we heard a few weeks ago in Paul's speech to the people of Athens on the Areopagus, "he is not far from any of us" (Acts 17:27).

The promise of Pentecost is that the Lord is always near. Through wind and fire. Through a gentle whisper. Through an abiding conviction. Through a community of faith. Through bread and wine.

The Lord is near.

This is the extraordinary promise that can sustain us through ordinary time, through *any* time.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

