

Today is Pentecost, the day we set aside to celebrate the Birthday of the Church. We've been singing songs and reading scriptures and prayers that tell the story of how this thing we all do together, the Church, came to be. When we hear the story of Pentecost, with everyone speaking in multiple languages and tongues of fire and thousands finding Jesus for the first time, it's frankly easy to become intimidated.

Because we look around today and think, Where's all that? Where are the miracles and the tongues of fire? Where's the powerful, power-filled Church that's moving and shaking and changing things?

Asking that question about Pentecost points to a whole set of questions that lie just beneath the surface of what we've been talking about throughout this series. Since Easter, we've been exploring how we are called to live Between Jesus' resurrection and his second coming, in this time when the Kingdom is already here and not yet here at the same time.

We claimed that those who follow Jesus are called to be different from the world around us, that we should look like Jesus' Life. We saw that the best way for us to live that different, holy life is in the Church (which began on Pentecost). That we're all given - by the Holy Spirit - gifts that should enable us to serve each other. A couple of weeks ago, Keven told us that we gather to celebrate the new life we're living with God and last week Sheila led us to see our purpose: to invite the rest of the world into this new life we've found in Jesus.

The scary thing about all that we've been talking about is how easily this new life with Jesus turns into a self-improvement program. If we're not careful, we reduce Christianity to 'just try harder' or 'just be better'. This powerful, world-altering, life-resurrecting faith ends up being sort of like the Atkins diet or P90X or the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. You just *try*, develop some new habits. And some people nail it and some people don't and that's that.

Then we hear the story of Pentecost and think, Woah I'm missing something big. But even then, we get caught up in the spectacle - the languages and the fire and the wind. It's easy for us to miss the true importance of Pentecost for all the spectacle of the day:

What actually matters on Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit creates a people who will show the world who God is.

That's it. That's the bottom line on Pentecost. Behind all the flash and truly awesome, miraculous stuff, God has called a people together to become the light of the world. The Holy Spirit is the heartbeat, the lifeblood of the Church.

That might sound odd to some of us. Of the three persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is certainly the most confusing, least understood. We can imagine the Father, in Heaven, ruling the world. And we really like Jesus, the Son who became human, who lived, died and was raised to rescue us from Sin and reclaim God's good creation.

But the Spirit? We're fuzzy on her. Even that I used a feminine pronoun to refer to the Holy Spirit probably weirds out a few of you. The New Testament uses "it" - not he or she - to refer to the Holy Spirit. Our modern bible translations have rendered the "it" as "he" because they want to remind us that the Holy Spirit is a person of the Trinity, as much as the Father or the Son. And

that's helpful to a point, but when all three persons of the Trinity are "he's", it's easy to get the impression that God is male.

Which of course God is not (and we're going to talk a lot more about the Trinity next week, so don't worry if all that is a little confusing). The early Church knew that God is neither male or female – or maybe even better said that God is *both* male and female. Since Father is a very male metaphor, and Jesus was biologically male, they preferred to use "she", the female pronoun to refer to the Holy Spirit. We're going to follow in the early church's footsteps today as we discuss the Holy Spirit and what she does in our lives and the Church.

So who is the Holy Spirit? Many of us grew up hearing her called the Holy Ghost (and you still hear that on TV and in movies today). The term "ghost" is unfortunate because even though back in ole King James' day, ghost and spirit were synonymous, today 'ghost' conjures images of departed loved ones and wronged, vengeful dead.

For many Christians, the Holy Spirit is sort of like a ghost - haunting the edges of our faith, lingering like a specter we don't quite know what to do with.

But the Holy Spirit is *vital* to our faith! She's the third person of the Trinity (again, more about next week). The Spirit is as fully God as is the Father or the Son. Everything that's true of the Father or the Son is true of the Spirit (and vice versa). The Spirit is coequal and coeternal with both the Father and the Son.

In short, the Spirit is God, living and active in the world.

But the Spirit didn't just enter the world at Pentecost. The same Spirit that created the Church at Pentecost has been active in the world since the beginning. I want to take you on a whirlwind tour of the Old Testament to show you how the Holy Spirit has been working in and through humanity since the very beginning:

Genesis 1 tells us that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The Earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters." -- Genesis 1:1-2 (NLT)

Throughout the Bible, the words we translate as 'spirit' can also mean 'wind' or 'breath'. So in the next creation story, when God first makes the man, God shapes him out of clay and then breathes into him. So we can read Genesis 2:7 like this:

"The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground. God breathed the spirit of life into the man's nostrils and the man became a living person." -- Genesis 2:7 (NLT)

From the beginning, what sets humanity apart from the rest of creation, what makes us unique, is that we are filled with God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit literally gives us breath and sustains us.

Throughout the story of God's people in the Old Testament, individuals would have powerful encounters with God. Throughout the histories in Judges, Samuel and Kings, we read that "the Spirit of God came upon" people like Gideon, Samson, Saul and David.

After the Exile, when God's temple had been destroyed, a prophet named Ezekiel had a vision of something new that God wanted to do. God told him,

"I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender responsive heart And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations." -- Ezekiel 36:26-27

Another prophet, Joel, had a similar vision of what would happen when God started this new thing:

"I will pur out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on slaves - men and women alike." -- Joel 2:28-29 (NLT)

When Jesus arrived on the scene, many of his first followers thought that time had come. But Jesus told them he was only the beginning. The night before he was crucified, Jesus told his closest followers:

"Anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father... I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate who will never leave you. [She] is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth." -- John 14:12-17 (NLT)

John gives us his own version of the Pentecost event, one that points us back to Genesis 2. When Jesus has been raised from the dead as the first of a whole new creation, a new Genesis story, he appears to his followers:

"Jesus said, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.' Then he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" -- John 20:21 (NLT)

If we don't understand that the Holy Spirit has been working since the creation of the world, that's just a weird, creepy story. Jesus comes back from the dead, meets up with his followers and then breathes on them. Is he worried he has zombie breath? Is he trying to breathe fire?

No. In the wake of the Resurrection, we are now part of God's new creation. When we choose to follow Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit. We become new creations. Just as God breathed the Spirit of Life into a lump of clay and brought it to life, so Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into we who were dead in Sin and brings us to new life.

And then of course we have the Pentecost story we've already heard this morning: the Spirit comes among Jesus' followers in power, working miracles and calling thousands to a new life in Jesus. This is the true beginning of the Church, the fulfillment of the visions God gave to Ezekiel and Joel.

And that brings us to today. Now we are the Church, the people of God raised to life. We have access to the same Spirit that created the world. The same Spirit that has empowered God's people since the beginning. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. The same Spirit that first formed the Church, first called us together.

That's what we so often miss. We read these stories in the Scriptures and think, Oh it must have been nice to live back then. Back when those cool things happened. We look around today and think, Where's the Spirit today?

But according to the New Testament, God didn't stop working in the world at Pentecost. Listen to what Paul tells us about the Holy Spirit in Romans 8:

"The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you." - Romans 8:11

We need to pause there for a moment: the *same Spirit* that raised Jesus *from the dead* is now *living in you and me*. All that power: power to make life out of death. Power to conquer sin and Death. The very power that called the world into being is within us because God the Holy Spirit lives in us.

Seriously: there is no excuse for us to be living in defeat. To try and try and try and experience defeat over and over.

So when our lives don't look like Jesus, the problem isn't with God. It's with us. And most often, it's because we're trying to achieve on our own power, our own ability.

I'm going to ask you an embarrassing question, so you don't have to raise your hand. How many of us have ever been trying to get a certain piece of electronics to work, and no matter what we do, it won't turn on. [turn to lamp] I'm going to use this lamp as an example, but maybe it's a computer or TV or DVD player or something else.

You try everything you can think of. You hit it. You take the bulb out and put it back in. You change the bulb. And nothing. It won't work. So you curse it:

You stupid thing. I never should've bought you. Worthless piece of junk. Can't even sell you in a yard sale. YOU'RE DEAD TO ME LAMP!

And then someone hears your righteous rage. They come in, see your dilemma and say, "Is it plugged in?"

And you spit back, "Of course it's plugged in! Do you think I'm an idiot? Who would be so dumb as to not check if it's plugged in!"

But then you look, and... it's not plugged in.

So you plug it in, and it works perfectly.

Something so simple. So basic. And yet so utterly vital. Without the power source, this lamp is a paperweight. It can be the best lamp in the world, the sleekest design and the most energy efficient bulb and yet without power, it's useless.

So too with us. Our new life in Jesus flows wholly and completely from the Holy Spirit. All our power to conquer the sin and death in our old lives comes from the Spirit. Our transformation comes from the Spirit. Our gifts we use to serve each other come from the Spirit.

It doesn't matter how smart or talented or patient or helpful we are on our own. Without the power of the Spirit, we cannot be the light of the world. We can't point those around us to Jesus.

And yet that's how many of us live our lives. We coast through our faith on autopilot. We figure checking in once a week will 'recharge our battery' enough to get us through the next week. But we're not battery powered. We need to be plugged in constantly to the Spirit.

Or, to use the Biblical metaphor, the Spirit is our breath. You don't breathe once a week. You breathe every day, all the time. *That's* what our life in the Spirit should be like.

But we walk around hold our Spiritual breath. Trying to make it through a whole week with whatever we can suck in on Sunday morning. Is it any wonder we struggle with untransformed lives? Habits we can't kick? Sins we can't shake? Relationships that stay broken? Marriages that continue to crumble?

We ignore the power of God that is within us and all around us. We hold our plugs and shake our fists at the sky and say, Where's this excessive, overflowing life I thought was supposed to be available for me?!

If you know what I'm talking about, if you can feel me right now, then I have very good news for you:

The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is living and active and available to you right now. You don't even have to pay a utility bill first. All you have to do is make yourself available to the Spirit, make yourself available to be transformed. In other words, you have to plug into the Spirit.

For the last 2,000 years, Christians have discovered countless practices that help us to be available to the Spirit. We call them Spiritual Disciplines or Spiritual Practices or Spiritual Formation. Here at Beaver Creek Nazarene, we highlight five practices as really good places to begin. If you want to connect to the Spirit this week, to begin the process of breathing in the Spirit every day instead of once a week, choose one of these five as a starting point.

In the bulletin, you'll find the Guide to Spiritual Practices. Start this week by reading Scripture or by praying. You can fast or observe a Sabbath day. You can practice sacrificial generosity. And there are dozens more, but these five are really good, really simple starting points. They help you to stop trying, stop working, stop flailing around trying to figure out why your faith isn't as powerful as you know it's supposed to be and instead plugging into the power of God.

When you do, when you begin to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in your life, you are truly living Between the Resurrection and the Second coming the way God has called you to. You find victory over sin in your life. You become a healthier, more whole person whose relationships begin to heal. You begin to serve others in ways that feel natural to you but are supernatural to everyone else.

You begin to see what Pentecost was really all about. Because you're part of the Church, the people of God who bear witness to Jesus' rescue. You have the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead within you and you are a light that burns brightly in your home, your office, among your friends and family. And our light burns in our community and around the world.

We become part of the work God is doing all over the world to restore creation, to reclaim what we lost in Genesis 3.

This is the Church. This is Pentecost. And this is what we celebrate today!

Prayer of Examine

1. In the last week, when were you most connected to the Holy Spirit?
2. In the last week, where were you least connected to the Holy Spirit?
3. In the next week, what will stand in the way of your connection to the Holy Spirit?
4. In the next week, how can you intentionally choose to connect to the Holy Spirit?