Pentecost Power

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Acts 2:1-13

June 4, 2017
The pastor of the church I attended as a child preached from the King James version of the Bible. The King James is old; we are talking 1611. King James is the version that supplies us with thee’s and thou’s. That is why we call it the King’s English.

The Holy Spirit goes by another name in the King James: Holy Ghost. Holy Ghost did a number on me as a child. I wanted nothing to do with the Holy Ghost. I equated the Holy Ghost with paranormal things such as haunted houses and ghost stories.

The metaphor of God as Father and Jesus as Son went down easy in my growing up years. Father and Son were familial, anthropomorphic words, but where does the Holy Spirit fit into this Trinitarian equation? I wish someone had told me that ghost is a Middle English word for spirit. The Holy Ghost is the Holy Spirit.

Today’s sermon concerns itself with two essential questions: what is the Holy Spirit and what difference does the Spirit make in our lives? First, the story.

Luke begins, “When the day of Pentecost came” (2:1). Pentecost is a word meaning fifty. It occurs fifty days after Passover.

First century Jews observed three pilgrim festivals annually: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Pilgrim festivals obligated Jews to travel to Jerusalem to observe its meaning. The first festival in the spring, Passover, commemorated God’s deliverance of Jews from slavery in Egypt. Fifty days later, in early summer, the Hebrews gathered for the harvest festival of Pentecost. It also went by the name First Fruits since people brought their first fruits to the temple as an act of worship. Later in the year, Jews gathered for a third festival called Tabernacles to recall God’s provision during their forty-year sojourn in the desert.
“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place” (2:1). The place is the upper room of somebody’s home, large enough to accommodate 120 people. Jesus started with 12 disciples, but by this time, there are 120 believers (Acts 1:15), a tenfold increase over their original number of 12.

Two things mark the moment: wind and fire. Wind and fire often accompany God’s appearance in Scripture.

“Suddenly a sound like a mighty wind filled the house where they were sitting” (2:2). Wind has a double meaning in the Greek. It can reference either wind or fire. God’s Spirit is like the wind. God breathes life into people. In Genesis, when God created Adam from the dust of the ground, He breathed life into Adam. God’s breath gives life to people.

Next, Luke reports, “They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that came to rest on each of them” (2:3). Fire often accompanies God’s presence in the Old Testament. God appears to Moses through a burning bush (Exodus 3:2). Fire accompanies the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:18). God leads His people through the wilderness with a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21).

The result of this wind and fire occurs in verse 4, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

“Other tongues” is the ability to speak in foreign languages. These languages are distinct from the tongues Paul writes about in 1st Corinthians 12-14, since they require someone else to interpret them. That’s a sermon for another day.
There are 15 nationalities identified in this passage. You would not want to read this passage in public without advanced warning, given the preponderance of obscure-sounding names. Why do you think I had Pastor David read it? These nations are broadly representative of where Jews lived during the Diaspora.

Three things about the Holy Spirit stand out in this passage. First, God gives the Holy Spirit to every believer. In the Old Testament, God gave the Holy Spirit to a few charismatic people—prophets, priests and kings. In the New Testament, God gives the Holy Spirit to everyone, both young and old alike.

Second, the Holy Spirit gives life to people. God’s Spirit breathes life into these once timid disciples. The Spirit’s fire is not destructive. It energizes people, just as fire fuels an engine. The Holy Spirit enlivens and energizes people.

Let me talk about the life of Holy Spirit this way. There are three major events in Jesus’ life: his birth at Bethlehem, his death on Calvary and his resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God, resulting in the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost. Bethlehem is God with us. Emmanuel is a name for Jesus meaning “God with us.” Calvary is God for us. Jesus dies on the cross for our sins. Pentecost is God in us. God the Father and Jesus the Son live in us through the Holy Spirit.

Third, the Holy Spirit imparts God’s power to carry on Jesus’ mission. Luke doesn’t tell us how the scene shifts in this story from the upper room to the streets. I interpret this to mean that the Holy Spirit enables these disciples to go public. The Holy Spirit drives them from hiding behind closed doors to the streets. In Acts 1, Jesus instructed them to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:4).
God’s Spirit empowers us to carry on the work for which Jesus sacrificed his life, namely the redemption of fallen humanity.

When I was in seminary, I had a professor named Elizabeth Elliott. Her husband, Jim, was a missionary in Ecuador. Jim and four others lost their lives seeking to win the Auca Indians to faith in Christ. In a remarkable turn of events, his widow, Elizabeth, led the people who executed her husband to faith in Christ. Jim wrote in his diary prior to his death, “Am I Ignitable? Saturate me with the Spirit that I may be a flame for you….I seek not a long life, but a full one, like you, Lord Jesus.”

Lord, set our souls on fire. Breathe on us, breath of God.

Ignite is the name of our capital campaign. Three hundred fifty individuals and families have signed on to Ignite. Let me speak to those who have not yet joined us. Maybe you may have been part of previous campaigns and thinking you are going to sit this one out. Perhaps you have never participated in such a campaign before now and it seems risky to pledge when funds are already tight. Maybe you are wondering about a three-year pledge since you may be moving in the next few years.

This project is worth your support. God wants us to eliminate our debt, refurbish our building and launch a major outreach initiative.

We are now at 80 percent toward our five million dollar goal. We can do it. If everybody does his or her part, we can reach our goal.
At the block party this afternoon, we will tally the pledges we have received and update our status toward our goal. I said last Sunday that I will stop talking about Ignite when we raise the money. There are pledge cards in the pews. You can leave them in baskets as you exit to the main parking area. You can use your phone right now to pledge online. If you are listening from home, you can make your gift online also.

When we conducted a pledge campaign to build this sanctuary nearly 20 years ago, we designated a half million dollars toward planting a new church in Loudoun Country. I will tell you more about this project in a moment, but I want you to know that Ignite will take Outreach to the next level. Approximately 30 percent of Ignite will go toward a major outreach initiative right down the street from us.

God has placed on our hearts people who are new to our country who may not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. For a long time, we have sent missionaries to faraway lands to preach the gospel. Now, people from these same countries are coming here. Could this be a Pentecost moment for our church as we seek to meet people’s physical, emotional and spiritual needs? Incidentally, if you are Anglo-American, these new immigrants are coming for the same reasons our ancestors did.

Recently, I received a call from Brian Clark, pastor of Riverside, the church we planted twenty years ago in Sterling, Va. Brian invited me to visit their new location. We arranged a day and time for my visit. When the day came, I was tempted to cancel. I was super busy and could not spare the time but I went out of duty. As soon as I arrived at Ridgetop Coffee and Tea, I realized why I was there. God wanted me to see how the investment made by our church 20 years ago is now paying spiritual dividends. During the
hour I was there, there must have been a hundred young parents with kids in strollers coming for coffee. The front door of their church opens to a state-of-the-art coffee bar. To the rear is an indoor children’s play area. Parents can visit with friends and drink their coffee while their kids play nearby.

When we planted Riverside, we imagined a church much like Centreville, a church we planted in the mid-80s. We bought land for Centreville and helped them construct a wonderful brick and mortar building. This time, God had other plans.

We negotiated with a developer to give us on the cheap five acres of land for a church site in Sterling. Brian and key leaders soon realized a church in this location would confine them to a single neighborhood. They looked elsewhere for a meeting site. Along the way, they evolved into one church in two languages. They sold the five acres and leased an office park. Still, they found themselves tucked away in an office building. They observed that Sterling lacks community space, so they asked God to lead them into closer proximity to people who do not go to church. They bought an office park last year and opened Ridgetop Coffee. One of their staff, Dan Eagan, grew up in our church. I also ran into Phil and Kay Taylor, who heard my announcement twenty years ago that we were staring a new church in Sterling. They were moving to Sterling and they have been charter members ever since. Together, VPC and Riverside started Brambleton Church nearly a decade ago. Recently, Riverside has taken over a Presbyterian Church that was closing its doors and are relaunching this ministry.

I’d say the half million dollars we invested in Riverside twenty years ago is a good return on our investment. Four new churches and hundreds of new believers is not too shabby. Twenty years
 ago, we could never have imagined all this ministry coming from this one investment.

 I cannot say for certain what will result from this new outreach initiative. Some of you want to know the details. Fair enough, you want to know what we plan to do with the money you will invest in this project. Already, this project has shifted from storefront presence in a strip mall to a greater investment in people—one part-time paid director and hundreds of volunteers to determine our future course of ministry. Like this first Pentecost, we know where we are at the start, but we do not know where God will lead. I have a dream about a moment twenty years from now when some of you and the people who will follow us will marvel at the ways God multiplied our gifts of time and money.

 Am I Ignitable? Build your kingdom here. Set our souls on fire.