

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ “ ‘In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
²¹ And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ (Acts 2:1-21)*

This is What God Promised!

Why have you come here this morning? I know that seems like an obvious question. Today is Sunday. And it’s a major festival of the church year. Today is the Festival of Pentecost. Christians worship on major festivals. But I bet that many of you are here today for a different reason: graduation. At the end of our service this morning, we’re going to give out diplomas to our kindergarten and our 8th grade graduates and most of you who are not members here at Peace, have come for that graduation ceremony. Since that’s true, I consider it to be a blessing that today is Pentecost. Nothing illustrates the purpose of Peace Lutheran School like Pentecost. Our school is not founded on the proposition that private education will produce higher test scores and higher academic achievement in high school. Our church does not operate a school so that we can have better student-teacher ratios or even to maintain better discipline than you find in public schools. While I do believe that our academics are competitive and our discipline will benefit our children when they get to high school, those things are side benefits. This school exists to carry out the mission of Pentecost. It is focused not on our achievement but on God and his promises to us. This morning, we have a wonderful opportunity to consider what those promises mean not just for the children who are graduating, but for all of us, members of Peace and guests alike.

This is what God promised: We would hear of the wonders of God. Now, when you hear the account of Pentecost, the most memorable part is the miracle, right? If you've ever studied a foreign language, you can't help but be impressed. Last week, I visited an outreach ministry to Hispanics in Detroit, and an American woman talked to me after the service. She was very impressed by the way the pastor there can just move back and forth from English to Spanish. Most Americans are not bilingual and the idea of learning all those words in another language – well, it seems like it would take forever, if you could do it at all. If you ever do learn a foreign language, you'll go through this period when you have to talk like you're still in kindergarten because you just don't know how to say very much. You often find yourself resorting to hastily invented sign language to get your point across. And that's very frustrating for adults.

Well, the apostles didn't have to do that. In an instant, they could speak languages they had never studied before. And not just one! At least fifteen different geographic regions are mentioned, many of which had people of various nationalities living in them. In a moment, these men could speak some or all of these languages!

Not surprisingly, the crowd was stunned by this miracle. Jerusalem was a large city and it probably always had a certain number of foreigners passing through. But on this particular day, the city was jammed with visitors because this was the Feast of Weeks. Under the law that God gave his Old Testament people, every Jewish male was supposed to come to Jerusalem three times a year to celebrate a festival, and this was one of those three times. By this time, the Jewish people had already spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Wherever they went, some non-Jews were attracted to their faith and converted. Every year, at these festivals, Jerusalem was flooded with foreigners – Jewish and converts – who came to celebrate.

That crowd heard the sound of great rushing wind and came together to find the disciples **“declaring the wonders of God”** in their own languages. That's the part that is easy to miss. These men could suddenly speak languages they never studied, but why? God didn't give them this gift so that people could ooh and aah over it, like it was some kind of spiritual fireworks display. He didn't do this for the entertainment value. God did this so that people would hear the message he wanted them to have. He did it in a dramatic way to underline for the church of that day and for the church of today that this is his message and we need to listen to it. But the real meaning of this miracle is that God gave his Church the tools it needed to share his message.

The festival of Pentecost reminds us that our mission today is to proclaim the wonders of God. What does that mean? In our reading for this morning, we hear the beginning of a sermon that Peter preached to explain what was happening. He started by talking about the miracle. But if you read on in the second chapter of Acts, you'll discover that Peter had much more to say. The wonders of God that he stood up to talk about were the life and works of Jesus. In the Church we have a special word for the message about Jesus: we call it the gospel.

This first Pentecost took place fifty days after the first Easter. On Pentecost Peter talked about what had happened on that first Easter: Jesus rose from the dead. Now, all by itself, that's amazing. In our experience, death is final. We can't undo it. All the medical science that we are blessed with today only holds it off. People die every day in every hospital in America. Every day, newspapers print obituaries. Every day, life ends. And everyone we've ever known who died is still dead. But Jesus died on a Friday afternoon and very early Sunday morning, he rose from the dead. His body returned to life. When he did that, he promised us a cure for dying. He promised that we will live even when we die. We will join him in heaven at the moment we leave this life and when he returns, he will renew and restore our bodies. We will live again.

All that is true because Jesus conquered the cause of death. We die because we're sinners. In American society today, the words “sin” and “sinner” have become very unpopular. We tend to dismiss them as the ravings of fanatics and fundamentalists. We assume that God would never judge or condemn anyone. But that is not what his word says. Jesus came to die because God does punish sinners. Death is his punishment for sin and after death, God sends sinners to hell forever. Jesus came to take that punishment for us. He came to suffer hell itself on the cross so that we don't have to. He came to die to take the punishment out of death – to change it from the doorway to hell to the doorway to heaven. Jesus won forgiveness for us. He won eternal life.

Pentecost is about the Christian Church in every age knowing and sharing that message with every person on this earth. Here at Peace Lutheran Church, we operate a school and a preschool so that our children know that message, just as we conduct services and other ministries so that adults know that message. That message is the heart of all we do. And I've seen the benefits. Just a few weeks ago during a chapel service, a

first grader who came into our school part way through the year answered a question. He told me very clearly: “Jesus died to pay for our sins.” All I could say to him was, “That was a very good answer.” He had learned the wonderful work Jesus did for him and for all of us.

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How did that child give such a good answer? Well, we the teachers and pastor here at Peace can't take any credit for the faith of that child. We do work hard to teach these truths and God has gifted each of us as he sees fit. But he gave that answer because the Holy Spirit worked in his heart. **This is what God promised: we would receive the Holy Spirit.**

Peter quoted the Old Testament book of Joel. Joel lived hundreds of years before Peter did, and yet God showed him these events. In the prophecy, Joel spoke of signs and wonders and dreams and visions. But the heart of what God promised is that he would pour out the Holy Spirit on his Church. He kept that promise on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit continues to come to us. How? Well, Joel pointed the way: he said, **“Your sons and daughters will prophesy.”** What does it mean? It does not mean foretelling the future. That's usually what we mean when we use that word “prophesy.” But in the Bible it means giving God's message to his people. That's how the Holy Spirit comes.

God has set a wonderful system in place. He poured out the Holy Spirit on his Church. The Spirit comes to people through the gospel and he changes their hearts. And then, God moves those people to share that gospel with others. All the preaching and teaching that happens in our church and school happens because the Holy Spirit has changed us sinners into believers and then he called us to serve as pastors and teachers. Then, he works through the gospel we proclaim to touch the hearts of adults and children alike. Every change that takes place is God working. I get no credit at all. But when I proclaim the gospel to you, when I point you to Jesus and all that he did for you, then I am applying the very power of God to you. And the Holy Spirit comes and he works in your heart. Then, as you grow and learn to share that message with your friends and your children and your co-workers, the Holy Spirit comes to them through the gospel you speak.

Every day here at Peace, we proclaim that gospel. Always, the Holy Spirit works through it. He has bound himself to the gospel. He didn't have to do that. If he wanted to, he could come in some other way. But he does not come in any other way because he has bound himself to the gospel. So if we want the Spirit, then we need the message about Jesus. Here at Peace, we have that message for you and your children. That's what we are celebrating in this graduation ceremony – these children have had another year of God's grace, another year of the Holy Spirit working in their hearts through the gospel.

Every time he comes, a miracle happens. Now, it's not as dramatic as those twelve men suddenly speaking languages they never learned. We don't hear the sound of a rushing wind or see tongues of fire on anybody's head. But it is a miracle when God enters the heart of an unbeliever and he gives that person faith. It is a miracle when God comes to children and strengthens their faith so that they want to live for him. It is a miracle when God comes to us adults in the hardships of life and the pains and sorrows that we face here and he comforts us. It is a miracle when he leads us to open our mouths and share the gospel with people who might not appreciate it. It is a miracle when the Holy Spirit works through the gospel and takes away the fear of a Christian who's dying. That miracle happens every day all over the world. It happened here every day this year as these children heard about their Savior.

That matters, because the end is coming. The last couple of verses in our reading for this morning speak of the signs of the end. Jesus gave his gospel to us to proclaim as the world draws to a close. One day soon, he will return. The only thing that will matter on that day is whether or not we had faith in him. If the gospel, the power of the Spirit has reached us, if God has given us faith in Christ, if we face life and death here trusting that he has taken our sin away, then when Jesus comes back he will take us to live with him forever.

But if we thought we had more time and left this matter for another day, if we heard that gospel and dismissed it as “Bible banging” or fundamentalism or a lot of nonsense, if we figured we're pretty good people and God has to take us to heaven, then my friends, when the Lord returns, he will tell us that he never knew us. He will send us to hell and we will suffer there forever.

Our mission as a church and a school is far greater than preparing these children for high school and college. We do that. But our mission is to prepare them to live forever with Jesus. The 8th graders are leaving our classrooms. But we hope and pray that we will continue to see them here in church so that we can share that gospel with them for the rest of their lives. The kindergarteners and the preschoolers have reached an

important milestone. God willing, we still have years to teach and share that gospel with them so that they continue to feel the benefit of the Holy Spirit's work in their hearts. Today, we're celebrating the fact that our children have had that message for one more year. And they are not alone. Everything that we do as a congregation proclaims Christ. In all of that proclamation, the Holy Spirit comes and works in our hearts. May we continue to hear that message and grow until we see him face to face. Amen.