



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE DAY OF PENTECOST: WHITSUNDAY, MAY 24, 2026
NUMBERS 11:24-30; PSALM 104:25-35,37; ACTS 2:1-21; JOHN 20:19-23

CATCHING FIRE

John 20:12-23 *[Glory to you, Lord Christ. When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.]"*

What good is a gift if we don't know it's ours or what to do with it? On Easter night, Jesus says to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit." Sending implies movement. And yet, 50 days later, they're still in the same room waiting for further instructions. While we're dealing with different authors – John in the Gospel vs. Luke in Acts, the question remains: When will the Spirit finally catch fire in them and turn these followers into leaders? More to the point, when will it catch fire in us?

I'm asking on behalf of Charlie, Emma, Logan, and Miles – four spirited children

who were baptized earlier this morning. They want to know what difference it makes to be "sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." Or if they're not asking that question yet – they will. Yesterday at baptism prep, I talked with them (and their parents and godparents) about the Holy Spirit – how it rides the invisible wind like a dove and comes to us whenever we need strength or power. We can't see it directly, but we can know that it's there. We see what it creates, how it fires us up and lights up the world.

The Spirit of God shows up throughout the Hebrew Bible. In our reading from Numbers, for instance, the spirit rests on people – but not in ways we can manage or control. It blows where it will, whether we're outside the tent with Moses where we're supposed to be or we missed the memo and are still inside the camp. God's Spirit won't stay in the channels we create for it, as helpful and holy as those channels may be. The Spirit is generous and playful. Likewise, in today's psalm, God's spirit is like an artist having fun – filling the earth with creatures, making Leviathan, that ancient sea monster, for the sport of it. And as for the Spirit in Joel (as quoted in Acts), it pours itself out on all flesh. It doesn't discriminate by age or gender; it makes the young see visions and the old dream dreams. The Spirit of God is subversive, it's creative, and it is radically inclusive; and it will not rest until we respond in kind.

Fast forward to Pentecost. The calm breath of Jesus in a closed room becomes a mighty wind that pushes the disciples out into the open air. It might be hard for us to picture what “divided tongues, as of

fire” resting on them looks like, but it wasn't for our 1st century audience. They saw it every day on the coin of the realm; a tongue of fire appeared above Caesar's head on each coin, asserting his power as a son of the divine. Here the Spirit subverts that definition; now, real power rests on each of us. The Spirit gives us the power to speak truth when before we were silent; it gives us the power to lead when before we were content to follow. The Spirit is how we know that we are part of something bigger than those who look and sound like us. The Spirit makes us part of a covenant community whose loyalty transcends national boundaries, that can't be limited to a single language or class or culture. The Spirit gives us the world.

So then, how do we know the Spirit when we see it? How do we know the gift is ours – or what to do with it? God's Spirit shows up differently in each of us. See where you find yourself in what follows. Some might find it in a fiery passion for justice; for others, it might be in your clearheaded calm when the rest of the world is raging. We don't have to choose one or the other

as more valuable; we need both. We might find the Spirit in our knowledge born of dedicated study or in the wisdom wrought from hard-won experience. Our community needs both. For some of you, the gift of a rock-solid faith is what brings you to the table; for others, it's your presence that somehow invites healing in those who are broken around you. Some easily discern what's helpful or harmful and make decisions quickly; others of us can hold the space with patience while we wait for the community's wisdom to emerge. Some have artistic gifts that can turn ideas into images and images into life; others' playfulness and boundless energy point us to the One who created us for both.

The gifts are different, and they can change in us over time, but they're all needed and they all require power. What's fascinating to me is that God is the source of our dissimilarity. There is no one model we're meant to conform to. This is good

news for Charlie, Emma, Logan, Miles and all the rest of us who are baptized into the body of Christ. They don't need to know everything to be faithful, and neither do we. They don't need to have every skill or talent to be of use, and neither do we. At the same time though, they each have a unique power to act in this world, and so do we. When we're sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, we are entrusted with a power that is subversive, creative, and radically inclusive – and at the same time, uniquely ours to use or to waste. That's the difference that baptism makes, or at least one way that it shapes our lives – no matter how much time we have. Baptism names and celebrates the gifts that are already ours. There is a role that won't be played in the universe unless we play it, unless we let the divine spark within us catch fire. In the Name of the One who has given us the Spirit and who can't wait to see what we do with it together, Amen.



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