

11 May 2008
The Feast of Pentecost

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Continuous Outpouring”

Text: Acts 2:1-21; John 7:37-39; Numbers 11:24-30

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has kept His Word and promise to send another Helper to be with us always. (Jn 14:16) A Helper to teach us of Christ, and to give us Christ. This Helper is the Spirit of the Lord Himself – the third person of the Holy Trinity. The Spirit active at creation, the Spirit that worked through Moses and the elders, the Spirit that descended upon Jesus in His Baptism – is now given to all of God’s people, just as Moses had wished. He is the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. (Is 11:2) Truly, our Lord has withheld nothing from us! For He who shed His blood for us now gives us this gift also. Today His Spirit is outpoured, to be with us forever.

We heard of this outpouring in the reading from the book of Acts, and we heard of many things that happened that day – *signs* that the Spirit had come. But we must be careful not to confuse the *signs* of the Spirit’s coming with the *work* of the Spirit who has come. For, yes, the signs were great – but they were not the greatest miracle that happened that day. There was a mighty rushing wind, but God had used such winds before – for example, to part the Red Sea (Ex 14:21). There were tongues as of fire, but God had appeared to Moses in a burning bush without consuming the bush (Ex 3:2). There was speaking in other languages, but that too God had done before, at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:7). The signs were necessary as *evidence* that the Spirit (who cannot be seen) had come (like what we heard also today as the Spirit was given to the 70 elders of Israel), but focusing on the signs may cause us to miss the point of why the Spirit has come. Focusing on the signs is like admiring the tag that adorns a Christmas present without opening the present! It is to misunderstand the whole point of the sign – which is to point to something even greater.

And this something greater is what the Spirit would now do through Peter and the eleven. For now, with the Spirit of the Lord poured out upon them, no longer timid

and frightened and confused, they stand and preach, and through their preaching the words of the prophet Joel are fulfilled – the Spirit of the Lord is poured out: on men and women, sons and daughters, people of all ages and races – so that at the end of Peter’s sermon . . . *there* is the great miracle of Pentecost! Three thousand souls believe and are baptized (Acts 2:41)! **For where the Spirit is, there is Christ, and there is the church.**

And so we celebrate the Day of Pentecost today not just as an historical event, and not hoping to repeat the wind and fire and tongues that happened at the first Pentecost – we celebrate because the outpouring of the Spirit that *began* on that day, continues among us still today. That the prophet Joel’s promise is for us too! That through the preaching of the Gospel and through the water of Holy Baptism, we too are given the Spirit of the Lord, and we are joined to the church. For the church is not our work, but the Spirit’s work. The church is not something we join, but to which the Spirit calls us and joins us. The church is the gathering and miracle of the Spirit, which is still happening among us today, and why we are here.

That is why we call the preaching of the Word and the giving of the Sacraments the *signs* (or *marks*) of the church today. *They* are the *visible* signs today. For through the Word and the Sacraments, we have the promise of the Spirit to come and to work. **And where the Spirit is, there is Christ, and there is the church.** And the order is important. It’s not that we know where the church is because the church does the marks! We know where the church is because the marks do the church. The marks are the means through which the Spirit is poured out **upon us** – whether it is through the preaching and baptizing of Peter and the eleven, or the preaching and baptizing of pastors today. It is through the Word and the Sacraments that our crucified, risen, and ascended Christ is still working among us today, sending His Spirit, forgiving sins, giving faith, and giving life. We have His promise, and so we can be sure.

And so we witnessed Pentecost today as George was baptized. Our Lord fulfilled His Word and made George His own, His son, through water and the Word. But some of you may be wondering why George needed to be baptized at all. For, after all, through the preaching of the Gospel the Spirit came to him, and he’s been coming to our church . . . he’s a “believer,” so why baptize him? Why is this necessary? The answer is not just because Jesus commanded baptism – that would be changing baptism from Gospel into Law! From a gift into an obligation! No, this Baptism was for George’s benefit. For did George believe? Yes . . . *but* . . . but how could he

be sure he believed enough? Or strong enough? Or good enough? How could he be sure that his faith today would be his faith tomorrow? He would be constantly looking at himself and his heart, and trying to measure his faith and basing the certainty of his salvation in himself. And how easy it is for the devil then to cause us to doubt, when we fall into sin, when we are anxious or worried, that we ever really believed at all. It was just an illusion, a charade. Just a wishful fantasy. See George, *you're no Christian! You're not good enough!*

But today, George was baptized! Baptism is not something George did, but what was done to him. Today, George did not come to Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ came to George, sent His Spirit, and said *you are mine*. **I** join you to my death and resurrection. **I** forgive you all your sins. **I** make you my child. **I** give you a place in my Heavenly home. And when Christ speaks there is no doubt! And so George's faith is not in his faith, in the fact that he believes, but in the baptismal work of Christ for him. And so when he sins, when he falls into doubt and despair, when he is anxious or worried, when satan attacks and assails him, he is able to say not "*But I believe . . . I think*", but "**I am baptized! I am a child of God! My Saviour does not lie! I am His!**"

And what wonderful confidence that gives not only George, but all of us who have been baptized! Those three thousand baptized on the Day of Pentecost, and you and me today. Confidence. Certainty. Comfort.

That is the "*living water*" of which Jesus spoke in the Holy Gospel. For when we live by the Law - or in other words, when we live by looking at ourselves and what we do and our own believing and our own efforts, we dry up. All our working and struggling to do and believe right drives us to thirst - like working outside on a hot sunny day. And what is worse, all our work does not satisfy, does not give us what we're looking for, but makes us thirst . . . and the more we work the more we thirst! A vicious, unending, unsatisfying, demonic cycle.

But to us who are oppressed and dying of thirst, we have this promise: that Jesus gives the living water of His Spirit. And all who drink of this water will never thirst again (Jn 4:14)! For the Spirit will satisfy our greatest need; the Spirit gives us what we cannot do or find for ourselves - He gives us Christ. And giving us Christ, giving us faith, and life, and forgiveness, and joy, so that the life we now live is not a dry chasing after what we cannot achieve - but the life of Christ. The life of Christ that flows out from us.

For Christ came and traded lives with us. Or better to say, He came and took our death and gave us His life. He came and took the heat for us – the heat of the Law and its demands, the heat of our sin and its punishment, the heat of our iniquity and guilt, Jesus took it all upon Himself on the cross . . . and thirsted (Jn 19:28) . . . so that by taking our place under the Law and into death, He could overwhelm them with His flood of life. That in His resurrection, He could pour out His life-giving Spirit upon us. And this He did – by handing over His Spirit as He breathed His last (Jn 19:30), and by the water and blood that flowed from His side: the water of Christ that now fills the font, the blood of Christ that now fills the chalice (Jn 19:34; 1 Jn 5:6-8). That through these we be refreshed, and have life. Life free from the condemnation of the Law, free from the fear of death, free from the oppression of the devil, free to live . . . in confidence and certainty.

And now we are invited to eat the Body and drink the Blood of the crucified one, who came to serve us with His death, and now comes to serve us with Himself. That as He lives we too may live. That we who hunger and thirst for righteousness may be filled. That we who sin be forgiven. That the Holy Spirit continue His work in us and join us to Christ. That we be absolutely sure, that we live in Christ and that Christ lives in us. For the work is His, not ours. The Holy Spirit given and working in the hearts of those on that first Pentecost, is the same Spirit given and working to us and in us. Yes, the outpouring of the Spirit continuing still today. Still building His church. Still gathering and washing and feeding children of God here today.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in them the fire of Your love.
Alleluia! (Introit)

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.