

The Festival of Pentecost & Jerico Confirmation Day  
Acts 2:1-13: "What Does This Mean?"  
May 30/31, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

### In Nomine Iesu

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#### EXORDIUM

Brought to the foot of Mt. Sinai after God had led them out of slavery in Egypt, the people of Israel were terrified. They were terrified because God came down on the mountain, and He didn't come meekly. He came down in a raging fire. The whole mountain was wrapped in a thick cloud of swirling smoke. Lightning flashed, the ground trembled, and God spoke with a voice of thunder.

The LORD had come to give His holy Law to His people, to tell them how they should conduct themselves in their homes, in their communities, and in their gatherings to worship Him. The clear message was this: If you disobey this God, His fiery wrath is a terrible thing to face.

John the Baptizer indicated that the Messiah would come with such fire: *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"* (Mat. 3:11-12).

Who could endure the day of His coming? Who could stand when the righteous God appeared (Mal. 5:2)? We have all disobeyed God's holy Law. We have all invited His wrath against us. But Jesus did not come to destroy us; He came to save us. He came to face the hot anger of God and to step into the flames of hell in our place. He made peace with God for us. And He wants all sinners to know it.

This is why He sent out the Holy Spirit. Just like at Sinai, God came again in fire at Pentecost, but it was a much gentler fire. The Holy Spirit inspired in the apostles a message not primarily of Law and judgment, but of grace and hope. The people did not shrink back from this manifestation of God in fear; they drew closer in awe. They were glad to hear these Galileans speak in their own languages *"the mighty works of God."*

The Holy Spirit had been poured out as Jesus promised to guide people in the truth. He was here to plant faith in sinful hearts through the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection and to continue to shine the light of His grace and forgiveness into their hearts. In thanksgiving and prayer for the ongoing work of the Spirit, we rise to sing our festival verse, "O Light of God's Most Wondrous Love" (ELH 399) / "O Holy Spirit, Enter In" (TLH 235, v. 1).

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God of all peace and consolation, who gloriously fulfilled the great promise of the Gospel by sending down Your Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to establish the Church as the home of His continual presence and power among men, mercifully grant unto us, we humbly ask You, this same gift of Your Spirit, to renew, enlighten, refresh, and sanctify us, to be over us and

around us like the light and the dew of heaven, and to be in us evermore as a well of water springing up into everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, to whom, with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 129)

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the second chapter of the Book of Acts. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:*

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. / Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians – we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" / But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."<sup>(ESV)</sup>

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)*

In Christ Jesus, who delivered on His promise to send the Holy Spirit to His disciples, and who still sends out the Holy Spirit even now, dear fellow redeemed, and especially you, Karson, on your Confirmation Day:

When Lutherans hear the account of Pentecost, they come across some very familiar words in Acts 2:12. There the devout Jews in Jerusalem ask a simple question, "*What does this mean?*" We are used to asking that question. In the six chief parts of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, that question is specifically asked twenty-two times. It is a prompt for digging deeper, for coming to a clearer understanding of God's Word.

But it isn't just Lutherans who ask this question. Everyone does. The expressions may differ somewhat, but the idea is the same. A child may point to any number of things and ask, "What is that?" A person may examine evidence and try to figure out how things come together, saying: "What do we make of all this?" Or we may search for answers about why God allows certain things to happen: "What does this mean, God? Help us understand."

The question is an important one. It acknowledges that we do not know everything. It expresses a desire to be taught. This is the position the Jerusalem Jews were in. It bewildered and perplexed them to hear these common Galileans speak in a multitude of languages. No matter where the people were from, they heard God's truth in their own native tongue. "*What does this mean?*" they asked one another.

Peter told them. He cited the words of the Old Testament prophet Joel beginning with this statement, *“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh”* (Act. 2:17). And a few verses later, *“it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”* (v. 21). Then he went on to teach about Jesus of Nazareth. Though He was crucified, died, and was buried, yet God raised Him up. Peter said that the apostles were witnesses of His victory over death, and that this Jesus was the one who now poured out the Holy Spirit as the people were *“hearing and seeing”* (v. 33). Jesus was the reason the message of salvation was being delivered to them in their own languages.

Hearing Peter’s words, the people *“were cut to the heart”* (v. 37). They felt the guilt of what had been done to Jesus some fifty days before this. With their *“What does this mean?”* answered, they now they asked a different question, *“Brothers, what shall we do?”* (v. 37). Peter replied, *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself”* (vv. 38-39).

Peter described the way for them to be reconciled to God. He did not tell them they had to carry out some great work or give a significant gift for the cause. Grace was extended to them on the basis of Jesus’ work. This grace was for everyone, no exceptions. Everyone who believed and was baptized would be saved (Mar. 16:16). These baptized believers received the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The same is true today. Forgiveness in Jesus’ name and the gift of the Holy Spirit are still given to those who are baptized. Many of you here today have received these blessings. God claimed you as His child in Holy Baptism and has continued to strengthen your faith through His Word. As long as you are kept in this saving faith, you retain the forgiveness of all your sins no matter what they may be, and the Holy Spirit continues to dwell within you. Especially today, we celebrate God’s giving of these blessings to Karson. We give thanks that he is now ready to confess his faith publicly in the presence of the congregation and to join us at the altar to receive the body and blood of our Savior in Holy Communion.

The devil does not want us to partake of these means of grace through which the Holy Spirit works. He tries constantly to tempt us away from them. He puts other things in front of us to keep us occupied and distract us from God’s saving Word. These may be good things like work and family, or they may be bad things that actively lead us to sin against God. Ultimately, Satan wants us to regard the Word of God like those scoffers on Pentecost. These heard the preaching of the apostles, and instead of listening to what was said, they accused the disciples of being drunk on new wine.

This treating the Word as insignificant or turning away from it can happen to any of us, and in fact it has happened to all of us. We have viewed the Word of God as something common, something we can take or leave. Maybe we told ourselves that what matters most is how we live our lives. Or what matters most is not what God gives to us, but what we offer to Him. We have failed to eat and drink and absorb the Scriptures as God’s own revelation and truth for us. Thinking we have the Bible mastered, we do not pour over it, humbly and diligently asking at every point, **“What Does This Mean?”**

And yet, even though we have not listened to and applied God's Word to ourselves as we should, God in His mercy has brought us again today to hear it. Whenever His Word is heard or read or meditated upon, the Holy Spirit is at work in us. Through the Word of the Law, He exposes the sins of our mind and heart, so that we realize how far we have fallen short of God's glory. And through the Word of the Gospel, He points us to Jesus, who lived the perfect life for us that God requires, and who died to atone for all our sins.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit led 3000 people to be baptized when they heard God's powerful Word of grace. And so He continues to work in our hearts today. We might not speak in other languages when He comes or have tongues of fire rest upon us. But His power is by no means diminished. He still comes assuring us that our sins are forgiven, that we are justified – declared righteous and innocent – in God's sight because of what Jesus has done. Through this Gospel message, He also strengthens our faith and sanctifies us to be bearers of light in a dark world.

We cannot do without these blessings of the Holy Spirit. We want them more and more. That is why we don't put away the question, **"What Does This Mean?"** when we are confirmed. The youth confirmed this week and next would tell you that they have learned a lot in the last two years. But they know they have further to go. Our prayer for Karson and all our youth is that they never stop growing *"in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* (2Pe. 3:18), and that the Lord keeps them faithful to His altar.

Confirmation is much closer to our spiritual starting line than to the finish line. We never get to the point where we have learned everything we could possibly learn from the Bible. We want to continue to dig into the Word and to search for the treasures God has placed there. The Holy Spirit will uncover them for us and lead us to a deeper and clearer understanding of the great love God has for us.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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