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Sermon

Presence, Peace and Power

Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

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Isn't it good to be back together in the same place? This has been a strange time for most of us. Not many of us have experienced an epidemic before – let alone one with such an impact on society on the way we live. However, it is not unknown: Some of you remember the polio epidemics of the 40's & 50's. In 1947-48 schools were closed from the beginning of December to the end of March. All mass-gatherings were prohibited during those epidemics which occurred in 1916, 1921, 1925, 1932, 1937, 1943, 1948, 1952, 1955-56, until with the development of the vaccine. Restrictions particularly applied to children who were most at risk so schools were closed and Sunday schools too. In some cases, Church and other community leaders were fined for having children to meetings.

Well, today we resume our gathering together – albeit with some restrictions to minimise the risk of spreading disease if it should happen to be present. There is a certain appropriateness to the day (Pentecost) and the readings we have. Pentecost is sometimes called the Birthday of the Church and we meet today with that celebration in mind.

We have been through a time of confinement. Initially, it was associated with fear to varying degrees. Then for most the fear subsided and we have continued in obedience to authority. The first disciples between Passover and Pentecost went through two stages of confinement as well. Through those 50 days, first they were locked in because of their own fear then they were told by Jesus to sit and wait for the Father's promise.

In John's gospel we are back at the time of Passover, Jesus had been crucified and his disciples went into hiding for fear of the authorities. If they arrested and killed him, they would be likely to come after his followers as well. So, on the evening of the day of Jesus' resurrection, we find them behind locked doors – for fear of the authorities. In John's gospel chapter 20:19 we read,

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you!"

They needed peace!

They were devastated by the events of Jesus' arrest, trial, flogging and crucifixion;
they were frightened at the thought of what might happen to them;
they were bewildered by the stories they had heard from Mary Magdalene and the other women that the grave was empty and that Jesus had risen.

What were they to think? What turmoil they were in! And Jesus came! They knew his **presence** with them.

- “What?” - “**Peace** be with you!”
- “But ...” - “**Peace** be with you!”
- “Who?” - “See my hands and my side.”
- “Oh wow!” - “**Peace** be with you.”

He was alive! And they were joyful! Again, Jesus declared peace over them and then he commissioned them:

V21: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

This, John tells us and he was there, is on the evening of the resurrection. The disciples have not acquitted themselves especially well and Peter has failed miserably – yet immediately Jesus declared his peace over them and commissioned them!

As he has been sent, so he sends them. How was he sent? Full of the Holy Spirit. It is by the Spirit of God, that Jesus ministered; they too need the Spirit of God. With that, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

There is an action of receiving, it is not just passive. It doesn’t just happen to you – you receive by faith, by seeking and longing for more of the Holy Spirit in your life.”

They are also charged with releasing forgiveness as they are sent: ²³ “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” Luke in his telling of the same events, wrote:

Luke 24:47-49 Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [my] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

Presence, peace, power

Jesus is **present** with them, he gives them **peace** and promises to send them in the **power** of the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel and to forgive sins.

But how does this gift of the Holy Spirit relate to the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2? That is a much discussed question as scholars to try to relate the two events to each other. Sometimes with medicine the side effects can be worse than the disease. And it seems to me from reading some of the approaches people have taken, that they do damage to integrity of scripture in their struggles with these passages.

I am not going to explore the arguments here except to say that the one which seems to make most sense to me is that this gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples is real and yet a prophetic action. Don Carson and Wayne Grudem (along with other scholars) argue for this position. Grudem writes:

When Jesus breathed on his disciples and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit”, it was probably an acted out prophecy of what would happened to them at Pentecost. In this same context – in fact, in the verse immediately preceding – Jesus had told them something that would not happened until Pentecost: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you”. But even though he said this before he ascended into heaven, he did not really send them out to preach the gospel until the Day of Pentecost had come. Therefore his words were looking forward to what would happen at Pentecost. It is best to understand the words in the next sentence, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” in the same way – he was speaking in advance of something what would happen on the Day of Pentecost. On that day they would receive the new covenant fullness and power of the Holy Spirit, a much greater empowering of the Holy Spirit than what they had experienced before.” ¹

¹ Grudem, W., 1994, *Systematic Theology*, IVP Press, Leicester, p769, note 13.

A week later, they were still behind closed doors when Jesus appeared to them again. Later, Peter led some to the disciples back to Galilee to go fishing. These were not yet 'men on a mission'! But the moment the Spirit came at Pentecost, Peter was on his feet fearlessly preaching to a large crowd.

Let us turn to Luke's account of the Day of Pentecost. The disciples had met with Jesus many times over 40 days but they were still in a passive learning role. When Jesus left them at the Ascension he told them (literally) to sit in the city until they were clothed with power from on high.²

So they waited and prayed. When the Feast of Pentecost came as they were in the room where they used to meet, dramatic events unfolded. There was presence; there was power.

The Holy Spirit manifested to them with the sound of great wind coming into the room and then in the appearance of fire. Fire was how God revealed himself to Moses at the bush in the desert. It looked like fire but it did not burn the bush. A pillar of fire guided the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years. Fire was on Mt Sinai when Moses was given the Law. Fire came down in the tabernacle and in the temple. The Jewish people were used to associating fire with God's presence. At Pentecost, the promise of the Father – the gift of the Holy Spirit - came and he was present.

That fire however did not stay as something distant but divided up so that there were tongues of fire sitting on the head of each of the disciples there.

And then they spoke. When the Spirit of God comes on people, they overflow in speech. This what happened in the event we heard about in Numbers³, when the Holy Spirit came on the elders – they prophesied. The same thing happened to Saul when he met a company of prophets, the Spirit of God came on him and he prophesied.⁴ Or think Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist and Mary all of whom prophesied as the Holy Spirit came upon them.⁵ It is a normal response to being filled with the Spirit to speak out the praise and words of God. Here the disciples speak in tongues – as they give praise to God in languages they had not learned.

The change in the disciples is great – they have been locked away in seclusion followed by a time of obedient waiting. Now they are launched onto a stage. Peter preaches fearlessly and indeed aggressively to the crowd who gather to see what the noise is about. And he doesn't hold back: he tells them they murdered the promised Messiah. However, there is the message of repentance and forgiveness: "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."⁶ Do you need salvation? The message of the Bible is ask for it. 'Whoever' means 'anyone.' You are included in 'whoever.' Call on the name of the Lord – ask for salvation. Jesus has bought it for you but you have to ask for it.

The disciples were away - commissioned by Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit - they led 3000 to Christ that day.⁷ The elders with Moses prophesied only once. Christian disciples have a continuing endowment of the Spirit dwelling within us and equipping us for ministry. Moses' longed, "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" And that has been fulfilled. The Lord has put his Spirit on his people and we are equipped to minister with diverse gifts and powers of the Spirit.

I have used a refrain today: **Presence, Peace and Power**. What are you longing for today?

The presence of God? Jesus said, "I am with you, every single day, to the very end of the age."⁸ And again we hear, "I will never, ever, leave you or forsake you."⁹

² Luke 24:49

³ Num 11:25

⁴ 1 Sam 10:10

⁵ Luke 1:41, 46, 67

⁶ Acts 2:21

⁷ Acts 1:41

⁸ Mt 28:20 [NTE: NT for Everyone]

⁹ Heb 13:5 [NTE]

Do you long for peace? Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. ... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."¹⁰

Do you long for the power of God? Jesus said to his disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you."¹¹ If you are a Christian, Paul says you have the Holy Spirit. But know that the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit multiple times. It is not a once for all experience. How can you be filled if you are already full? Two things – think of a balloon. A balloon can be full but still be filled more. The other is that we leak! There is always prayer, Come Holy Spirit. We need more of him and he wants more of us.

So let's pray for the presence, the peace and the power of God among us.

Lord Jesus Christ, you sent the Holy Spirit - your presence with us. Send us your Spirit, Lord. Let us be aware of his presence with us – today and every day. Give us your peace as we trust you. Come, Spirit of God and fill us again. Clothe us in your power to be your co-workers. Amen.

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¹⁰ John 14:27

¹¹ Acts 1:8