

**Building the House of Love:
THE SPIRIT IN THE HOUSE**

Acts 2:1-12

*What does it mean
when the Spirit is in your House?*

A sermon preached by
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So much has been turned upside-down by the worldwide coronavirus pandemic. Hardly any aspect of life has not been affected. But surely the front lines of the battle have been in the medical field—the hospitals, doctors, nurses who have been heroic through this time. Dealing with changing rules and protocols, going to work in fear for your life, trying to protect people to the point that hospitals actually have to lay employees off—it’s been a crazy time. As a community, we have had a fairly light brush with the virus so far, but several of our people who have had unavoidable medical issues have had to spend time in the hospital, without family present, cared for by people in spacesuits. It’s just been weird.

One of the strangest experiences for many people over the last few weeks has been giving birth during the pandemic. You think of the usual experience of having a baby: husband in the labor room, nurses and doctors in and out, family gathered around, everyone celebrating new life, taking pictures, snacking in the waiting room. It’s a party! But I’ve read several articles this week about women who had to go in to give birth in COVID-19 hotspots like Seattle and New York City. They were separated from their husbands at the door, tested for the virus, and labored pretty much alone, attended by nurses garbed in PPE. The husbands were allowed in for the birth, in masks and gowns, but then had to leave. The mothers wore masks and could not kiss their babies until the results of their tests came back negative. No other family was present until they went home from the hospital. The fear of being alone in an infected location was almost overwhelming.

At least they will have a good story to tell; in fact, around the world, people are naming their babies Covid, Corona, Lockdown, Tina (short for quarantine), and Rhona. It has been a strange time to give birth.¹

Pentecost was a strange time to give birth to a Church. The conditions were not conducive then, either. The disciples had pretty much been on lockdown out of fear since Jesus had been killed. He had risen from the dead and appeared to his closest followers for 40 days after his resurrection. Then he was taken up into heaven, and they were alone again. Before he

ascended, he told them to pray and wait in Jerusalem until they received power from God. So that's what they were doing.

Then it was the day of Pentecost, the Greek word for what the Jews called the Feast of Weeks. It was a big religious festival, and Jerusalem was packed. On the morning of Pentecost, they gathered in the upper room to pray, about 120 disciples and women. Then an astonishing thing happened. The Holy Spirit of God fell upon them like a mighty, rushing wind. Flames of fire appeared on each person there, but it did not burn or consume them. I'm sure they were thinking back to the encounters Moses and Elijah had experienced with God. Then the speech just began to bubble up—not gibberish or some sort of spiritual prayer tongue, but actual languages that they had not learned. The visitors to Jerusalem could hear and understand these working-class Galileans speaking in their own native language. They were “*amazed and perplexed*,” the Scripture says, and they asked, “*What does this mean?*”²

The day of Pentecost is a watershed event in the history of God's people. We call it the birthday of the Church. But it may be that Pentecost is the culmination, the climax, of God's plan for humanity. In fact, we might look at the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as events leading up to Pentecost. God sent the Son to prepare the way for God's people to receive the Holy Spirit. E. Stanley Jones, the great Methodist missionary and pastor, once asked, “Why is it that we celebrate Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter—the birth, the crucifixion, and the rising of Jesus—and yet we pass over the celebration of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the birthday of the Church? Are we more conscious of God with us—the incarnation of Jesus, than of God in us—the indwelling Spirit? ...Here is where our faith is faint and anemic. It lacks the red blood of the Spirit's life within our pulses.”³ We cannot understand the power and the plan of God unless our faith is also grounded in Pentecost. So what does this mean?

Pentecost means Jesus is still in the house. We've been talking since Easter about moving out of the house of fear into the house of love. The house of love is the house of Jesus. And we may think that after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus that he has left the building. Maybe Jesus has moved on and left us to ponder his life and teachings. Jesus has

left, but he is not gone. He promised his disciples several times never to leave them or forsake them. *“I will not leave you orphaned,”* he said, *“I will be with you.”* The last words he said in Matthew: *“Remember, I am with you, even to the end of the age.”*⁴ Pentecost is God keeping God’s promises. It’s what God does.

The Holy Spirit is the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the world. Christianity is unique among the world’s religions in that we believe in the Trinity: one God in three persons. Many religions believe in multiple gods; several believe in only one god. But Christians believe there is one God known in three ways—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are God, and all three are one. Only the Christians believe that God’s essence is community between three manifestations of divinity. It’s very complicated and mind-boggling, if you ponder it too long. Pentecost is the creation by God of the divine community on earth that represents the divine community in heaven. The coming of the Holy Spirit means Jesus is still in the house.

Pentecost means further that everyone is welcome in the house. Our Father’s house is a big, big house, and all who come to God in faith are welcome here. It’s no accident that God sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Jerusalem was packed with visitors from all over the world. They would go home and tell the world what happened that day. There is a reason Luke gives that long list of nationalities who heard the disciples speaking in their own languages. If you mark those places on the map, you cover the known world from east to west, north to south. This Spirit is for everyone! God’s love and God’s church are inclusive—nationality, race, gender, education, socio-economic status, political persuasion, or sexual orientation—everyone is welcome here.

But it’s not that way in the world, is it? After two thousand years, we have still not reached the vision of Pentecost. Division, hatred, exclusion, abuse, and persecution still tear our hearts and our communities apart. In the last month, when we should have been focusing on keeping one another safe and healthy, we have seen the murder of two more black men killed senselessly by law enforcement: Ahmaud Arbery in South Carolina and George Floyd in Minneapolis. I love our Fort Smith police, and our Chief Baker made a compassionate and courageous statement about the killing.

But Christian people cannot be silent when hatred is hidden in a cloak of authority, and innocent lives are taken.

Christianity Today published an article Friday about the character of George Floyd, the man killed in Minneapolis. In his hometown of Houston, George was active in Christian ministry in the notorious Third Ward, an area of housing projects and high crime. Surrounded by gang violence, George was known as a “person of peace.” He moved to Minneapolis to participate in a discipleship program that included a job placement. Knowingly or unknowingly, Floyd apparently gave a store clerk a counterfeit \$20 bill, and within minutes, his life was over.⁵

Such tragic killings are not without precedent. In the early years of the 20th century, lynchings of black men numbered in the thousands. The Ku Klux Klan was arising out of the ashes of the Civil War, and thousands joined across America.

In 1906, an African American preacher named William Seymour and seven other men were waiting on the Lord and praying in a house in Los Angeles, sort of like the disciples were doing in Jerusalem. Suddenly there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that knocked the men to the ground and gave them the utterance of tongues. The Spirit spread across the city. They got an old church building on Azusa Street, and the so-called Azusa Street Revival lasted for almost ten years. Tens of thousands of people from all over the world and all walks of life—rich, poor, men, women, Americans, non-Americans, black, white, Asian, Latino—came by car, by horse and buggy, by train and by boat to experience the power of the Holy Spirit. In a time when lynchings, were common, people of all races were embracing each other as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. Frank Bartleman, a historian of the Azusa Street Revival, said, “The color line is washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ!”⁶

The Azusa Street Revival spawned several denominations and started a worldwide movement that is known as—wait for it—Pentecostalism. This is the mission of the people of Pentecost: to welcome all—and all means all—into the house of God.

Finally, Pentecost means that there is power in the house. The Holy Spirit is the power of God. It may be as dramatic as wind and fire and

tongues, or it may be as gentle as a mental nudge telling you to call a friend in need. But when the Holy Spirit is present, there is power in the house.

The Holy Spirit is the power of salvation to all who believe. It's ironic that Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks to the Jews, is the harvest festival. They sure had a harvest on the day of Pentecost! In the midst of the confusion, Peter stood up and preached the first Christian sermon, about who Jesus was and what had happened to him and how this was the fulfillment of all the Jews believed. Then Peter invited the people to believe and be baptized in the name of Jesus, and 3,000 souls were saved that day alone. It was the start of a movement that would change the world—and save the world! If you have yet to experience a personal relationship with Jesus, the Holy Spirit can take you there today, no matter where you are listening to this sermon.

The Holy Spirit is the power to live victoriously. The Spirit leads us and guides us and corrects us and heals us and draws us along the path toward God. The Spirit is how we plug in to the power God has already placed within us. Trevor Hudson, a Methodist preacher from South Africa, put it this way:

We need to face the simple fact that to try to follow Jesus without the Pentecostal power of the Holy Spirit doesn't work. We just cannot do it. From a biblical point of view, it appears that everything that happens before Pentecost is a preparation for this gift of Wind and Fire. This world was created so that in following Jesus Christ, we can have friendship with Abba, Father, and be given the Holy Spirit. God-made-flesh lived, died, and rose so that our eyes would be opened to the unfathomable depths of God's love and we would be ready to receive God's Spirit. The message of Pentecost is that there is a new power available, the very power of the kingdom of heaven.⁷

This is a gift that God puts in each of our hearts when we come to faith in Christ. E. Stanley Jones called the Holy Spirit our birthright in Christ. God wants us to have this powerful gift. When we open ourselves to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God will give us all the gifts of victorious living: peace, joy, purpose, energy, wisdom, effectiveness, all the good stuff.

Early in his career as an evangelist, before he began his long tenure as a missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones was frustrated that his audiences in America seemed unresponsive to his messages. Preaching at a camp meeting, he went out after a service and lay down under an apple tree. He was exhausted. The Lord seemed to come to Stanley and said, “You’re tired, aren’t you?”

Stanley replied, “Yes, I am, for I have worked very hard.”

“And you’re out of patience, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am, and I have a right to be, for these people are hard and unresponsive.”

Then the Lord said to Stanley Jones: “Do you see this apple tree? How does it bring forth fruit? Does it work itself up into a stew trying to be fruitful? Or does it simply keep the channels open, taking in life from soil and sky and allowing life to flow through itself into the fruit? And is it not all unstrained? Then if you’ll not fret or worry about results, but simply keep the channels open, letting My life flow through you, then you will bear fruit naturally without strain or drain.”

That was an experience of Pentecost for E. Stanley Jones. Years later, he recalled, “I arose, relaxed and released. I didn’t have to succeed—I only had to keep the channels open. God did the rest.”⁸

I want you to hear this voice of God speaking to you today. I want to invite you to plug in to the Spirit that already resides in you. I want to encourage you to experience the outpouring the Holy Spirit in your life. Jesus is in the house today. All God’s children—even you—are welcome here. There is power in the house for you. Whether the Spirit comes as a shout of praise or as a whisper of peace, it’s all good. It’s all God. Open your heart; open your mind; open your life to this outpouring of Pentecost. Let it rain down on you, on us, and on the world.

Let us pray. God, we pray today for your Spirit to pour out on this world you love. Where there is sickness and death, bring healing and comfort. Where there is sin and guilt, bring forgiveness. Where there is fatigue and anxiety, bring strength and peace. Where there is hatred and prejudice and division, bring equity and justice. God, send your Spirit today. Let it pour down on us. Let the rain of your love wash this world clean and bring us

all into your Kingdom, even now, Lord, and forever. Lord, let it rain. Open up the floodgates of heaven and pour out your Spirit, we pray in Jesus' holy and precious name. Amen.

¹ <https://www.vogue.com/article/giving-birth-coronavirus-pandemic-advice>.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/05/nyregion/coronavirus-pregnant-birth-quarantine.html>.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/baby-names-coronavirus-new-parents-covid-19-india-pandemic-sanitizer-a9480376.html>.

² Acts 2:12.

³ E. Stanley Jones, *The Way to Power and Poise* (E. Stanley Jones Foundation, 20200, 51).

⁴ John 14:18, Matthew 28:20.

⁵ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/may/george-floyd-ministry-houston-third-ward-church.html>.

⁶ Rich Nathan, *Both-And* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 48.

⁷ Trevor Hudson, *Pauses for Pentecost: 50 Words for Easter People* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2017), 111.

⁸ Jones, *op. cit.*, 386.