

"And the Lord Came Down"

Genesis 11:1-9

May 15, 2016

The Day Pentecost

The day of Pentecost is a great festival in the church calendar and celebrates the Holy Spirit coming down with the sound of a rushing wind and the appearance of tongues of fire upon the disciples of Jesus Christ. The name for this day comes from the Greek word meaning fifty and indicates that this festival day occurs on the 50th day after Easter. However, this festival has its origins thousands of years before that day and its effects are felt thousands of years after that day. For this was not the first time God had come down, nor would it be the last.

We start our celebration by going back in time thousands of years to a time just after the Great Flood. God told Noah and his family to multiply and fill the earth. Yet the people stubbornly refused to do this. They settled on a plain in the land of Shinar and refused to budge. Not only did the people refuse to do the will of God, but they actively sought to challenge God by implementing their own will. They decided to build a city with a tower that reached up to the heavens. Their stated purpose was that they wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to be more important than God. They wanted to be the "god" of their lives. They wanted to be in charge of their present and in control of their future. Since the entire earth had only one language and spoke the same words, it was easy for them to be united in their rebellion against God.

And what did God do? Our text says, "And the Lord came down...." The people thought they had accomplished something great in building their tower into the heavens, but it was nothing. The Lord still had to come down to see this pathetic monument to sin and rebellion. Yet the Lord could see that this was only the beginning of what humanity, united by one language, could do in rebelling against Him. So, He came down and confused their language so they could not understand each other.

Did that stop humanity's rebellion against God? Well, it stopped this particular rebellion. The people stopped building the city and the tower and were dispersed over the face of the earth by the Lord. However, now, instead of just being separated from God, they were separated from each other by a language barrier.

But did it stop humanity's rebellion against God? No, that continues to this day. In fact, every person who has ever lived, including every person sitting in this church or standing in this pulpit, has wanted to do exactly what the people who built the Tower of Babel tried to do. We want to be free to refuse to do the will of God. We want to challenge God by attempting to implement our own will in place of His. We want to make a name for ourselves and be important. We want to be in charge of our lives now and in control of our futures. Despite the nice religious words we might speak, we want to be independent of God and independent of each other.

So what did God do to handle the continued rebellion? "And the Lord came down." Only this time, instead of coming in power and judgment to punish as He had done at Babel, He came down in weakness and humility to fix the problem. He came down from heaven to earth in a more permanent way – in the flesh and blood of humanity. Born as a baby in Bethlehem, God, in Jesus Christ, grew to be a man. Instead of rebelling against the will of God, He perfectly obeyed the will of God for us and in our place before God. Instead of sinning, Jesus took our sin upon Himself. Instead pronouncing judgment and condemnation upon us as we deserved, Jesus stood under the wrath as He did NOT deserve and was condemned. Instead of punishing us for our sins, Jesus endured the punishment for our sins in our place.

Jesus' death on the cross paid the price in full for all of our sins. His resurrection from the dead three days later ratifies this and proves it. We are free from our sin, free from the fear of death, and free from eternal punishment in hell. We have peace with God, peace with one another, and the peace that comes from knowing that we shall live forever in the presence of God.

That is great news – the best news in this world corrupted by sin and overrun by evil. But good news is not good news if you have not heard it or have not believed it. And sin keeps us from hearing it or believing it on our own. As Luther wrote in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him."

So what does God do? "And the Lord comes down." He came down, not in weakness and humility to save people, but with signs and wonders to make salvation accessible to people. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down to the disciples, as Jesus promised, with "a sound like a mighty rushing wind" and with "divided tongues of fire...on each of them." This empowered the disciples to preach the Word of the Lord in many different languages to the people of many different language groups who were in the city that day. Through the preaching of the Word of God and, as we see later on in Acts 2, through baptism, people received the gift of the Holy Spirit themselves, were brought to faith, had their sins washed away, and obtained salvation and everlasting life. The Scripture testifies, "There were added that day about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:41)

Our world today is not much different, spiritually speaking, than it was in the time of the Tower or on that first Pentecost. People are still slaves to sin which makes us ignore the will of God and replace it with our own. Sin still cuts people off from God and one another and condemns us all to death and hell. That same sin keeps us from knowing God and receiving His love, His forgiveness, and His salvation. So what does God do about what we are powerless to do? "And the Lord came down."

The celebration of Pentecost today is more than an historical narrative. It is an ongoing event. The Holy Spirit comes down today, not with the power and might of powerful winds and tongues, but with the Word of God and the Sacraments. Although these tools of the Holy Spirit *seem* weak and powerless, the Holy Spirit uses them as He did on the first Pentecost to enter into the hearts and lives of people, convert them to faith in the Triune God, wash away their sins, and give them everlasting life in heaven.

The Holy Spirit has done that for us: bringing us to faith through the proclamation of the Word of God; washed away our sins through the waters of Holy Baptism; and prepared us for the wedding supper of the Lamb then in heaven by giving us Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper now. The Holy Spirit will continue to do the same for others who, because of sin, have not heard or not believed the message of salvation. As we continue to freely share what has been so freely given to us, more and more people will have access to salvation. As we faithfully and frequently teach, preach, and proclaim the Word of God in its truth and purity and give out the Sacraments according to Christ's institution of them, the Holy Spirit will enter people's lives, create faith, forgive sin, and strengthen them in that faith and lives of good works.

But, some may say, the devil and the world seem to be winning. Churches (at least in America and Europe) are declining in numbers and influence. We may be tempted to think that the tools of the Word of God and the Sacraments are not enough. We need something more. Some may even think that we need different tools. Do not give in to that temptation. Continue to be faithful in your use of and witness to the Word of God. Our job is not to be the Holy Spirit but to do that which allows the Holy Spirit to access to and work in people. The Holy Spirit will convert and create faith where and when He will. We trust Him to do that.

When things get really bad and evil seems to be dominant in our society and culture, remember that God is still in charge. What will He do? As He came down at Babel; as He came down at Bethlehem; and as He came down at Pentecost, the Lord will come down one final time. Paul writes to the Thessalonians (and to us), "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore, encourage one another with these words." (1 Thess. 4:16-18)

So be encouraged and don't fear. The Lord has come down to us that we might go up to Him: up to Him in faith when we hear and believe the Word of God; up to Him in spirit when we die and leave this earth to be with Him; up to Him in body and soul when the Last Day finally comes and we ascend to heaven to live eternally with Him and all of the saints. As we heard in last week's lesson from Revelation, we, with all of God's people, continually cry out, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."