

**“A Year Later ...”**  
**Acts 2:1-21 & Acts 12:1-17**  
Sermon by Jan Edmiston  
June 4, 2006 – Pentecost

***“What does all this mean?” indeed.***

This was not the first Festival of Pentecost. The Jews had been celebrating Pentecost since the days of Moses just after they had escaped from Egypt. According to the Old Testament book of Leviticus, the Jews were told to celebrate an agricultural festival – The Festival of Weeks – 50 days (or about seven weeks) after Passover every year to thank God for the first spring crops.

Because Jesus died at Passover time, it was also fifty days after the death and resurrection of Jesus when Peter and the other disciples had come to Jerusalem for this Festival of Weeks.

In fact, Jews from all over had come to Jerusalem for the festival – from what is now Italy, Greece, Crete, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran, and Iraq. But this was not like any other Pentecost. This was not merely a feast of thanksgiving with somebody singing “Bringing in the Sheaves.”

Something different happened this time, on this particular Pentecost. Something extraordinary happened that we can scarcely imagine.

We can picture violent winds because we know what that’s like. We can even imagine violent winds filling a whole house, especially if we’ve ever lived through a tornado or hurricane.

But what about “divided tongues of fire”? What would that look like? Or was the writer being metaphorical? Was there some kind of magnetic spiritual energy that filled the room?

Apparently when the disciples began to speak in other languages they’d never spoken before, they caused such a racket that an international crowd gathered and wondered what in heaven’s name – literally – was going on. And then they realized that these uneducated men from Galilee were praising God in languages other than Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek.

Were they drunk? “Of course not,” said Peter. It was only 9:00 in the morning. Something else was going on. Something supernatural.

Peter spontaneously stood up to preach the first of many sermons he would deliver – sermons that would convict and anger and inspire and blow away those who

heard him. On this particular day, after hearing Peter preach, three thousand Jews converted on the spot to become followers of Jesus. *That was some preaching.*

But what did it all mean? What happened on this particular Pentecost to transform the disciples?

This is an excellent question. From this point on, nothing would be the same for the 12 Disciples.<sup>1</sup>

The followers of Jesus – soon to be called Christians<sup>2</sup> – were on fire. Conversions – some of them shocking – were an everyday occurrence. Among those converted included an anti-Christian terrorist named Saul<sup>3</sup> – and an Italian Gentile named Cornelius.<sup>4</sup> And other combinations of Jews and Gentiles became followers of Jesus.

Some of these first Christians were persecuted by the Jewish authorities, and one of the first Deacons ever chosen – a Deacon named Stephen – was stoned to death because of his faith. It was dangerous to be a Christian in this 1<sup>st</sup> century world, but when we get to Chapter 12 of Acts the persecution of Christians reached a new level. One of the original Twelve was killed for his faith.

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By the time we reach the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Acts, it was about a year ... or maybe as many as five years later after that first Spirit-filled Pentecost. We know this because the king of the land was now Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great.<sup>5</sup>

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You might remember the name of Herod the Great from Christmas stories. He was the King when Jesus was born. He was the one who ordered all male babies to be slaughtered in hopes of eliminating the child born to Mary. And so Mary and Joseph had left the country until Herod the Great was dead.

Herod Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great. And he was also the nephew of the king who had overseen the crucifixion of Jesus. But now he – Agrippa –

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<sup>1</sup> There were still twelve disciples, even though Judas Iscariot was dead, because Matthias had been chosen to replace him. See Acts 1:15-26.

<sup>2</sup> The believers at Antioch were the first to be called “Christian.” See Acts 11:26.

<sup>3</sup> Paul had once been called “Saul” who according to Acts 9:1-2 had terrorized believers. His conversion is told three times: Acts 9:1-19, Acts 22:4-16, and Acts 26:9-18.

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius was a Gentile centurion. His conversion is found in Acts 10:1-48.

<sup>5</sup> Herod Agrippa I was appointed king by Emperor Claudius in 41 CE. If Jesus was born around 7-4 BC (Herod the Great died in 4 BC), assuming that Jesus lived 33 years, then Jesus died circa 36-40 AD.

was carrying on the Herod family tradition of terrorizing Jesus and those who followed him.

Up until now, the Twelve disciples seemed to enjoy a unique Divine protection. Sure they had been arrested. They had even been flogged for preaching about Jesus.<sup>6</sup> But this illusion of Divine protection was shattered in Chapter 12.

Herod Agrippa ordered James – one of the original Twelve – to be “killed by the sword.” In other words, he was beheaded.

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We’ve seen enough footage of innocent prisoners on their knees surrounded by masked terrorists to get an idea of the horror of this kind of death. This is what Herod Agrippa did to one of Jesus’ disciples – James, the brother of John, the son of Zebedee, one of the so-called “sons of thunder.”<sup>7</sup>

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James was not just one of the Twelve; he belonged to the inner circle of disciples. Sometimes Jesus took only a handful of disciples aside to witness something special, and James was one of those special disciples.

- He was there, with only Peter and John when Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop into a shining white Being.<sup>8</sup>
- He was there, with only Peter and John, when Jesus raised a 12-year old girl from the dead.<sup>9</sup>
- He was there, with only Peter and John, when Jesus prayed at the Garden of Gethsemane just hours before his arrest.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus had died during Passover. And now – perhaps only a year later – James was also martyred around Passover.

Because the Jewish authorities sadistically rejoiced when James was beheaded, Herod Agrippa proceeded to arrest Peter too. And we can only assume that the same fate was in store for him. In fact, when we read that Agrippa was waiting for Passover to end so that he could “bring Peter out to the people” it sounds a bit like the process Jesus went through, during an earlier Passover season. The plan was surely to kill Peter.

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<sup>6</sup> See Acts 4:3 (Peter & John arrested) and Acts 5:18 (all/most of them arrested). In Acts 5:40, the elders had the apostles flogged before releasing them from jail.

<sup>7</sup> Archaeologists have discovered a stone with Zebedee’s name carved on it in Capernaum which appeared to have been from a home. While Jesus chose followers who were not generally leaders in their communities, the father of two of them was apparently well-known.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 17:1-8

<sup>9</sup> Mark 5:37-42

<sup>10</sup> Mark 14:32-42

With four squads of guards, escape was impossible.  
But with the power of the Holy Spirit – as we've seen – nothing is impossible.

You heard the story: an angel appeared while everyone was sleeping, chains fell away, iron gates opened. Perhaps the most amazing thing about this story was that Peter was asleep. It was the night before his certain death. But he was sleeping like a baby between two guards.

After he escaped, Peter – now a free man – knocked on the door of praying Christians and stunned them with his story.

“Tell this to James” Peter said. A different James – the brother of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> And tell the other believers too. It had not yet been Peter's time to be martyred. That time would come. But not yet.

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What a difference a year makes.

One year Jesus is humiliated, betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends. And just the next year, perhaps, those friends have been filled with a Spirit so powerful that they are able to do extraordinary things. They are even willing to die for the sake of Jesus' message.

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This time next year, Fairlington Presbyterian Church will be celebrating our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation – a church that started as a Vacation Bible School that some Presbyterians living in the Fairlington neighborhood had thrown together. They had just moved to Washington during and after the War, and they were energetic and grateful and aware of what it meant to make sacrifices for something you believe in.

As I watched so many people spend their Saturday yesterday – and several evenings before Saturday – working so hard for this church, I got a bit of that Pentecostal feeling. People were happy and energized even sorting books and blouses.

The Rummage Sale yesterday will pay for this year's Vacation Bible School – our 60<sup>th</sup> Vacation Bible School. Your young men have seen visions of 60 children enrolled to mark our 60<sup>th</sup> year. My friends, by the power of the Holy Spirit, this is far from impossible.

Your sons and your daughters once prophesied what the future of Fairlington Presbyterian Church could be with a computer lab that transforms people's lives in the most basic and the holiest of ways. People come into this building every week from –

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<sup>11</sup> See Acts 1:14, 15:13 and Galatians 1:19.

literally – all over the world. We teach them a common language – the language of cyber-space, the language of hope.

Your old men dreamed dreams of a pipe organ and a year ago, we installed it. (And, for the record, it wasn't just the dream of "old men." So many had that dream. Young and old. Men and women.)

So what do we see for the future? Not just for this congregation but for ourselves? Our families? Our communities? Our nation?

Where will we be a year from now? How will we be serving? What amazing things could we accomplish if the Spirit of God was once again poured out upon us?

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I get a chill every time I read this verse from the prophet Joel:

***God says: I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the LORD's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.***

The portents that James and Peter witnessed were dark indeed. What portents will we witness in the coming year or years?

Much of the world hates us – some because we are American, some because we are Christian, some because we say we are Christian but don't act like it. God only knows what the future holds in terms of terrorism and war – blood and fire and smoky mist.

But great and glorious things are coming too: there are new people to tell about the counter-cultural ways of Jesus, the life-saving ways of Jesus. What visions do we see? What dreams do we have?

They can't just be my dreams, my visions. They must come from that spark of holy inspiration ignited when the Spirit is upon this people.

We must be willing to believe in angels. We must be willing to bang on doors to tell people what we've seen. We must be willing to die for what we believe.

This happens when the Holy Spirit moves, when the Spirit of God lights a match under us and lights a fire in our deepest places.

I believe that God regularly and consistently ignites that fire but we quickly douse it. We put that fire out when we see it in the eyes of our sons and daughters, our young men and young women, our old men and old women who still dream dreams.

We put the fire out because it's so much easier to go year after year praying safe prayers, thanking God for the spring crops (those beautiful flowers and trees blooming in the June sunshine). It's so much safer than allowing the Spirit to blow through this place and stir us from placidness.

It's so much easier to say:

*"We just can't afford it."*

*"That's too much to ask of people."*

*"We'll upset so-and-so if we move in that direction."*

It's so much easier to douse the fire and resist the rush of God's Spirit. We've seen what can happen when the Spirit is allowed to move and it's not always painless. But it is ultimately great and glorious.

I believe that if we ask, the Spirit of God will come upon us today and show us what we are supposed to do a year from now, five years from now – in this congregation, in our families, out in the world. They are all connected, you know.

By God's grace, the Spirit still moves in us and among us and through us. By God's grace, even if the future looks ominous, we are able to rest in faith. We don't know what the future holds; but we know who holds the future.