

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, across time, across space, across the ages of our world, we marvel that we are the church. We are the church founded by Jesus Christ and with the rush of the Spirit, but we are human. Sometimes, God, we are the church at its worst, chasing our own tails and desires instead of your greater callings. And sometimes we are the church at its best, spreading your love and care across the hurting of the world. Holy One, when we are at our best and worst, walk with us to become more bounded to one another. We are here because we affirm the call to gather as one Body, of being the Church of Jesus Christ that moves throughout all history. We are here because we affirm your work among us and our work as the thriving church going forward. We celebrate this Pentecost day not as a monument of the past but a direction going forward.

Gracious God, be with each and all of us to proclaim your goodness in this world. We lift up to you the pains of our hearts, those things we can hardly bear. We lift to you the celebrations that make us joyous. And, God, we lift to you everything in between, for all of our lives are within your presence. All that we are is yours. Take us and make us, mold us into the people that serve the Church that Christ founded and the Holy Spirit emboldened on that Pentecost day and all the days following. We pray all these things in the holy name of the one who we still search after and follow today, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one people, one church, throughout all time...

## SERMON

Happy Birthday, Church! With the rush the wind, a little bit of fire, and some profound speeches, Christ's Church came to be. Let's be honest: it hasn't been perfect; the church sometimes stood in its own way, and sometimes it's just downright done what it

wants. We've struggled with things like the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the issues that led up to the Protestant Reformation, and the way that Native Americans were abused in the name of the faith among many others, but the heart and mission of the Church has stood the test of time. It still stands today. We are still here, vibrant as ever, and the heart of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit resides among us, so it is worth a celebration.

But the church is a dynamic thing: the only thing about the church that remains the same throughout history is its heart and its mission. The details will often change. It was dynamic from the beginning: everything changed with the rush of a wind and tongues of fire above the disciples' heads. They not only moved forward with this new calling; the shape of God's presence changed throughout the world. Indeed, the reality of God's presence changed; we received the Holy Spirit, and God moves in new ways with its arrival. Most importantly, the Day of Pentecost showed us that with those tongues of fire, a new trail has been blazed for us, a trail that shows church's future is still very much ahead. Let us look at the story of Pentecost from Acts, especially those tongues of fire, and see how that day proclaims a future that has, is, and is yet to be fulfilled for Christ's church.

The Book of Acts is a unique book, for it is the only one that tells the story of how we got from Jesus' disciples to the Church. It begins with the ascension of Christ in chapter 1. Chapter 2 tells of the new thing that has come to be not very long after, perhaps about ten days. The disciples are huddled inside, and all heaven, so to speak, breaks loose. A rush of wind came through and filled the house. It's no mistake either. "Wind" is another term for "spirit." Another way to say it is that God's spirit rushed throughout the house. The Holy Spirit and Pentecost have arrived. As a result, the disciples are not the same; what looked like "tongues of fire" sit above each of them. They spoke in new languages and went out of

the house, speaking to the crowds in this fervor. Of course, all are amazed; they have no idea what is happening with this astonishing sight. Peter, the lead disciple, now is empowered to lead where he seemed like a fool in the Gospels. He speaks with authority about the thing that has taken place, and he speaks of the prophecy of Joel. No longer is it just the chosen few but all people are now open to the movement of the Spirit. This is nothing less than the birth of the Church, which we recognize today.

I've always found the "tongues of fire" to be the most interesting, but it's not exactly clear. What are "tongues of fire" and why were they even there? What's the point? I was lucky to have an expert on the Holy Spirit and Pentecost at Iliff, Dr. Albert Hernandez, who helped fill in some of the cracks with this expertise. I love this interpretation. What seems like "tongues of fire" aren't really tongues at all. He explained that what looks like a tongue also looks like the Hebrew letter Yod, which to us looks like an apostrophe. Yod is a special letter because in Hebrew, it is the first letter of the unspeakable name of God. You actually see that name everywhere when you read scripture, but you never see it as is originally. Think about whenever you see the name "the LORD" in all capital letters in the Old Testament? That's a placeholder for the unspeakable name of God, which can be translated to "I am who I am." It is too holy to speak in its original Hebrew, but with the movement of the Holy Spirit, a sign of God's very name is now hanging above the disciples' heads.

The tongues of fire are not merely a symbol; they are proclaiming a new reality in the world. The game has changed. This is a new generation of God's presence among the people. First, there was God's visible presence in the wilderness, where God dwelled around the Ark of the Covenant and the temple. But God's presence there was confined to a particular place. Then there was the bodily presence of God in Jesus Christ. Same story.

Now, we have a new reality. In a way, the tongue of fire is another way of God claiming the people and proclaiming a new presence. We are God's people in a whole new way because God now dwells within and around us. God is in the world and working in a way that is so new, different, and far beyond our previous understanding of how God works. But one thing never changes: God works as God works on God's schedule in God's way. The Bible is clear: any time we think we can pin down exactly what God will do or when God will do it, we are pinning Jello to the wall or trying to stack marbles in a corner. It just doesn't work for us to put God into a formula, and it is proven again with the Day of Pentecost.

So that was the birth of the church. At the time, it was a strange and incredible new thing. God now resides with the people in a new way, and it was hard to grasp, but the people eventually worked out how to live as the church in that age. The Holy Spirit came to be among the people, the ongoing presence of God after the physical presence of Jesus Christ. Because of the Holy Spirit, we have God among and within us constantly, moving us to be agents of God in this world as the church. We are not merely those who worship God; we are those who have God's name sealed within us. It's not temporary; it's a permanent reminder that as long as God works, we are the ones to be the church in these walls and in the world around us. In that age and in this one, God is always doing a new thing.

Lately, there's been a bit of commotion with a study which came to be on the front page of the Wyoming Tribune-Eagle a week or two ago. The headline was in big letters and simple: "Wyoming Losing Its Religion." It spoke of a study by the Pew Research Center that found across all states that people were not identifying themselves by typical Christian titles. Add to that all of the statistics about the so-called "decline" of mainline Christianity we are always hearing about, and you get what seems like a bleak picture. What's the

easiest conclusion from this study and all of the noise around us? People just aren't Christian any more, and the faithful are going away. The church is on its way out because people just don't follow God anymore. I guess, in that case, we may as well pack up and forget this whole thing, right? I need to find a new job, and you need to find somewhere else to be on Sunday morning. But no. To respond personally, I'm not afraid of the end of the church; I'm offended by this whole line of thinking. It proclaims a Gospel that has a coming end, and that is one we do not follow. I do not serve a dead God and a decaying institution. I serve the Living God and the Risen Christ, and the church is as alive as it ever has been. Thoughts like this article presents feed into fearful politics, and we are not people of fear. We are Easter people that celebrate a new beginning of generations ago and a new beginning happening today. We celebrate that God has come to be with the people in a new way, and the ongoing life of the church is the result. We celebrate that our God of life is always doing a new thing.

Yes, I take a different view than the story the statistics seem to say. Contrary to popular belief, the church is not dying. People aren't stopping being Christians but are tired of the so-called "Christianity" that is more about a religion pushing personal agendas than following the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When you read the article, it points out that the people of today are tired of tired politics, tired of tired battles that often gets masked as Christianity. The simple fact has never changed: the world wants to be fed by the real, unadulterated Gospel of Jesus Christ that invites people to drink from the living water. Indeed, the church is not dying but God may be doing a new thing. The church changes with every age, and God is walking with us and directing us all the way. Our reading from Ezekiel is on point. This is a prophecy that told of the reinvigoration of Israel after the

Exile. It is God, it is the Spirit that gives us Breath. If you could see this in Hebrew, that would be a pun. The message is the same now. The people thought that Israel was done for, but the prophet spoke a different message. It is the same then as it is now: God is never done. The church will never be done as long as God is never done. God will do what God will do, and most of the time, it's only understood in retrospect. God is still moving; God is still speaking, and the church is still working, no matter what the statistics seem to say.

Those tongues of fire may not be over our heads visibly beyond that one day, but they are still there. God is still naming us as God's own, directing us on a new path as on that day of Pentecost. The church is not on its way out because there is still too much work to be done, and the One in Charge hasn't told us we are all done. I see the evidence firsthand. I'm proud that I have so many colleagues doing amazing acts of ministry. In a couple of months, while I am gone on my mission trip to Guatemala, the guest preacher for Faith is one of my colleagues from Colorado Springs. She pastors a new church start where people can give their testimonies, especially those who have struggled throughout life. This is not a sign of the church's dying; the Holy Spirit is still rushing through the world as it did that Pentecost day. One of my colleagues is the Rev. Jerry Herships, who pastors the church called "After Hours," which meets in a bar. This is an important and incredible ministry because this may be the only sign of Jesus Christ that some people may ever see. "After Hours" is the church that goes to the people and meets them where they are to show the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And every week, I believe, if not more, Rev. Herships goes to a park in Denver and offers communion to anyone, anyone that passes by. And the relationships he builds are incredible. This is not a sign of the church's dying; the Holy Spirit is still rushing through the world as it did that Pentecost day. So, to respond to the statement, it's

not true. We are not losing our religion. I am not afraid of the future of the church. God is still in control. Christ is still moving through the church. The Holy Spirit is still empowering us as it always has.

Pentecost is probably the most underrated of church holidays but the most fundamental to remember. It is the birthday and continuing celebration of our existence. We are here because God promised God would never leave us, and the result is the Holy Spirit rushing among the disciples and creating the church. We are the disciples of this current age, and we hold the sacred trust given to those disciples generations ago: to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ moving in this world. Sometimes we will be more effective than other times, but we are not done; we are not ready to pack up or give into rampant speculation that the church is toast until the One in Charge tells us we are done. That hasn't happened yet, so we cannot and should not resign ourselves to fearfulness when the One who brings hope and joy is not done yet. Because of the church then, now, and always, we say, "Thanks be to God!" Amen and Amen.