

*UNEDITED DRAFT*

Dear friends in Christ,

Imagine yourself for a moment one of early followers of Jesus. He rose, he ascended into heaven. According to Acts chapter 1, he left behind a congregation of believers totaling about 120 people. What about the thousands who flocked to hear him and see him over the course of 3½ years? They came and went. They wanted an earthly king with earthly benefits and earthly privilege. His death proved that wasn't going to happen, so they moved on. But about 120 remained faithful to Jesus... a group smaller than what gathers here at Good Shepherd on a typical weekend.

And the task Jesus gave them? "Go and make disciples of all nations!" (Matthew 28:19.) And "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" Acts 1:8.

Can you imagine being in that original Christian congregation and how overwhelmed you would feel? Now, Jesus promised them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and they would receive power. But they had no idea what that meant. Nor did they know when it would happen. We of course know that it was 10 days from Jesus' ascension until they Holy Spirit was given. Every day they were left in unfilled expectation. I am very curious about what was going through their heads and what conversations they had during that week and a half.

"Jesus couldn't have meant 'all nations' could he? I've never even traveled outside of Israel. And maybe when he said, 'YOU will be my witnesses...' maybe he meant only some of us... or that future generations will gradually take the gospel to other nations. How could this sole, little congregation of believers truly do anything big? We are nobodies. We are being hunted. People think we're members of a sect and that we're crazy. People think we're abandoning our heritage and our religion. No one will listen to us. And that's among our *own* people! How much less will people take us seriously in foreign lands. Go? Witness? Evangelize the world? We're petrified, powerless, penniless and persecuted. This is *not* how worldwide movements launch! Logic says we hide, lock the doors, and lay low for a few years. That would be our best shot at surviving."

I can't say for sure that's what they thought or what they talked about, but their behavior seems to indicate that this can't be too far off.

Have similar thoughts gone through your head when it comes to the mission God has given us here at Good Shepherd? "Well, there's only so much this little group can do in this big city... not to mention the whole world! We are nobodies. If we speak up much or do much, we'll be labeled fanatics. Make disciples in Omaha... and beyond? We just can't expect much. We have so little power or influence. Take a look at the budget... we're hanging on by a thread. And we know how people feel about the topic of religion. If we bring it up, we'll be inviting persecution."

This way of thinking is just plain wrong. Let's take a look at the story of the first Pentecost and we will learn that through the Holy Spirit, we are genuinely **empowered**. Through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in us, God empowers us to do what he has called us to do. And with his power working in us and through us he can do immeasurably more than what we ask or even imagine. Listen to Acts 2:

**Acts 2:1-14 When the day of Pentecost came...**

Pentecost means “50<sup>th</sup> day”. This would be the 50<sup>th</sup> day after the resurrection. It was already a Jewish holiday, their harvest festival which took place 50 days after Passover. The first of the wheat harvest was coming in. They would bake bread with that new wheat and bring it to the temple in Jerusalem as an offering. It was a first fruits sacrifice to honor God and trust that the rest of the crops would be harvested.

It’s not a coincidence that the sending of the Holy Spirit came on this day. Pentecost today is also a celebration of God’s bountiful gifts poured out through the Holy Spirit. We too are thankful for the harvest of souls that has been gathered, and anticipate the harvest that will yet take place.

So, our text says that the disciples “**were all together in one place.**” By disciples I think it’s more natural to understand this as a larger group than just the 12. This was probably a gathering of the 120 or at least a good number of them.

“**Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.**” Suddenly... unexpected. Even though they knew the Holy Spirit would come, this took them by surprise... much like Jesus coming on the last day will come suddenly and be unexpected for believers, even though we have seen the signs and know he will come soon.

There was a sound like the blowing of a violent wind. This wasn’t a physical phenomenon. There was no wind blowing... just the loud sound of one. This was a supernatural phenomenon. The sound came from heaven!

“**They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.**” Not literal fire, but “like” tongues... tongues that flickered like fire. There is no mention in our story that the believers were asking for this gift. God simply granted it. Undeserved, unasked for, God bestowed life, gifts and blessings. The tongues symbolic of the languages they were gifted to be able to speak.

“**All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.**” The tongues of fire on each. Not some but not others. All were filled with the Spirit. There is one Spirit. But note individual gifts. (Not one massive flame over all!) God gives us all (every last one of us) individual gifts, yet it’s all from the same Spirit. And it’s all for the good of the one body.

What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? This does not refer to coming to faith in Jesus as Savior. Certainly working faith in people’s hearts is the work of the Holy Spirit. But these were people who already believed in Jesus. This filling of the Holy Spirit was a new measure of gifts, and understanding, and boldness, and ability to proclaim to people from all nations. He came and in this case gave supernatural gifts.

“ **and [the disciples] began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.**” There is much talk these days about speaking in other tongues, but the meaning here is clear: Other human languages. This wasn’t some spirit language, or ecstatic speech. The believers were speaking in other known languages that were recognized by the Jews who had come to Jerusalem from those countries. Some today think that tongues speaking is “the” gift of the Spirit. This just isn’t true.

In many places we hear of those filled with the Spirit. More often than not, tongues speaking isn’t mentioned in association with it. Ephesians 5:18ff says, “**Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. 19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord**

**Jesus Christ. ... Submit to one another... Love... Children, obey.... Serve wholeheartedly.”**

The early Christians when looking for people to help distribute humanitarian aid, were looking first and foremost for people “full of the Spirit.” These would be the people who were gifted to serve!

Being filled with the Spirit, then, is a receiving of divine gifts to be used for God’s glory for the building up of the body of Christ, the church. God’s goal: Get the most people in contact with the cross of Christ for the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. To accomplish that goal he fills his people with the Holy Spirit. He does so to bestow on his people supernatural abilities... maybe not speaking in tongues to evangelize those of other cultures. But supernatural ability to help connect people to Christ. This happens when we speak. ...sing. ...give thanks. ...obey. ...love. ...serve!

You might be thinking: “These things are natural, not supernatural.” No they’re not! Sin destroyed our ability to know God and thus speak about him intelligently to others. We can’t sing with true joy, or give real thanks, or obey or love or serve... without the Holy Spirit breathing into us new life and abilities that were lost due to sin.

Why no (or few) miraculous gifts? Hebrews 2:3-4 **“how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”**

The “new” salvation accomplished by Christ needed to be confirmed as from God. God did confirm it with eye witnesses, signs, wonders, miracles and the gifts of the Spirit. Having confirmed his salvation he does not need to continue to confirm it. The need for the miraculous gifts of the Spirit has passed.

Our text continues: **“Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.”** This was one of three feasts that had to be celebrated in Jerusalem. So many were present from many different countries.

**“When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?”**

They knew these were not schooled men. Yet they spoke flawlessly in other languages. **“We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”**

There are always skeptics, aren’t there? Some who won’t believe no matter how obvious the truth is. Thomas was one. Some in the crowd were also skeptics. “Too much wine!” If you’ve heard foreign languages, it might sound like drunken babbling. They refused to entertain the thought that the power of God stood behind these events.

**“Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.”** Now Peter spoke up... it was time for them to listen. We’re not going to listen to the sermon Peter preached today. That can be your homework assignment.

But we do see an important truth. The Spirit came. The gifts were given. Amazing, supernatural gifts. Why all this to-do? What was the purpose? What was God’s end game in all this? The purpose: that *God’s Word might be shared...* that salvation through Christ might proclaimed. The wind, the fire, the foreign language speaking ... all to draw attention and empower believers so that the mighty deeds of God could be declared. There is one God and he

must be made known. He delivered his salvation in one way through his one Son, Christ Jesus. This is how the early church was born. This is how our church will grow and thrive today.

Can God accomplish big things through this small group meeting in Midtown Omaha, Nebraska? Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he can! He has! He will!

**The personal witness of each member.** We are hundreds, and each one of us has friends and contacts that are unchurched. If each of us has just 10 people we interact with regularly, that would potentially be four or five *thousand* people directly impacted by Good Shepherd! Now this means, of course, that we need to be active in showing Christ's love, and active in proclaiming his truth. We will need to be bold and honest in alerting people to sin and its terrible consequences. We need to be bold in sharing the good news that Jesus is the only solution to that problem. The Holy Spirit empowers you for this life witnessing!

**Our outreach as a church.** When we do things like the upcoming Playgroup, or the Kids Summer Bible Camp or Fall Festival, we work together to bring people in the community to Good Shepherd and to get our name out to the community. We pray some will come and hear about Jesus.

**Our work in nurturing the faith of believers.** We operate a school and have Bible classes, and operate a Sunday school to help people grow in their faith, and more confident to share it.

**Our Sudanese ministry.** Ten years ago, who would have dreamed we'd be working with people from the South Sudan. This past Friday, Peter Bur, our Sudanese leader graduated from our seminary's Pastoral Studies Institute. He received a call to reach out to displaced South Sudanese people in North America and in Africa. But Good Shepherd will still be his home both for their family and the ministry. God has allowed us to be part of this amazing kingdom work!

**Our support of North American missions.** We give mission offerings to our Synod that help establish new missions in North America. One of the newest missions to be approved is right here in Blair, NE. A seminary graduate was called to serve there. WE are also looking into the possibility of starting a new mission in Papillion or Bellevue to connect more people to Christ.

**Our support of world missions.** Our mission offerings also help support the gospel work we do in 28 countries around the world. In addition I recently became the chairman for the Europe Administrative Committee for the Board for World Missions. I may be taking a trip to Bulgaria and Albania as soon as this September to encourage the church there.

Everything I talked about being done through God's people at Good Shepherd! God has empowered us to take the gospel to the world, and we see it happening!

And he will empower us as we go forward. What great things does God have for us to do this year? Over the next 10 years? Continue to trust him and the power he gives. He will continue to empower us and give us the gifts and resources we need to reach out with the gospel to the world. Let us boldly and courageously go and do what God has called us to do!

Amen.