

**ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH**  
**COBLESKILL, NEW YORK**

May 23, 2010 – DAY OF PENTECOST, YR. C

The Rev. Nina George Hacker

Sermon: “*Empowered by the Spirit*”

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| Joel 2:28-32     | (The outpouring of God’s Spirit prophesied)                        |
| Psalms 104:25-37 | (Praise for God creating the world through the work of His Spirit) |
| Acts 2:1-11      | (God’s Spirit descends upon the believers)                         |
| St. John 14:8-17 | (All who love Jesus keep His commandments)                         |

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Today is Pentecost, from a Greek word meaning ‘fifty,’ because we celebrate this high feast 50 days after the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. For 40 days, Jesus taught and encouraged His disciples. Then, after Christ’s Ascension, His followers waited another 10 days for His gift to them of God’s Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

In ancient Israel, the joyful celebration of Pentecost was originally an agricultural festival in which the first fruits of the grain harvest were offered to God (Lev. 23:15-16).<sup>2</sup> In some traditions, it had become a time to commemorate the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Thus, Pentecost was seen as marking a fresh beginning in Israel’s history.<sup>3</sup> By giving His people a moral code by which to live, unlike that of any other nation surrounding them, God was doing a new thing. For Saint Luke, who authored the Book of Acts, this particular Pentecost represented the dawn of another New Age for the people of Israel.

And it begins just as the prophets had foreseen—with the outpouring of God’s Spirit upon all believers, and with this gift, a radical change from living by the Law, to being led by the Spirit. No one who believed in Christ was left without a share of God’s gift (Acts 2:3-4). All who called upon the name of the Lord were immediately filled with the Holy Spirit—not only for performing specific, limited tasks, as with the judges and prophets of old—but for empowered living, the rest of their lives.

Suddenly filled with God’s spirit, the apostles burst forth into words of praise in languages unknown to them, but which were recognized by other Jewish pilgrims at the festival.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, we have “simulcast” technology, in which an event is broadcast by radio and TV, and streamed on the Internet, simultaneously, often in different languages around the world. Well, on that Day of Pentecost, racially and ethnically diverse people from all over the Greco-Roman empire heard the disciples proclaiming the great deeds of God’s salvation through Christ. They heard the good news all at the same time, each in their own language. This unrestricted encounter with God’s very Spirit was a concrete sign of God’s redemptive purpose for all humanity, as the Spirit breathed new life into anyone who was open to receive Him—Jew or Gentile.

Dr. Glendon Harris, a Methodist preacher and author, once wrote about “The Holy *Gust*.” The words ‘gust’ and ‘ghost’ are related. In both Hebrew and Greek, the terms for ‘Spirit’ are also used for ‘wind’ and ‘breath.’

We see this in the prophet Ezekiel’s vision. When he called to the wind, the Spirit or breath of God came into the dead, dry bones of the animals and they were raised up as living beings. On Pentecost, the Spirit of God breathed new life into the apostles, and the Church was raised up as the living Body of Christ on Earth.

Today's psalm proclaims praise for God's Spirit creating the universe out of nothing, bringing order out of chaos. Throughout the Old Testament there runs a deep conviction that nothing comes into being, and no one can do the work of God, without the Spirit of God. In the New Testament, it is the Holy Spirit who empowers Jesus, beginning with His conception, and throughout his ministry, equipping Him to teach, heal, and work miracles. And before Jesus ascended to the Father, He promised to send this same Holy Spirit to equip His disciples for ministry in His place (Lk. 24:49).

Notice, I use the word "He" for the Holy Spirit, because He is not an 'it' or a thing (even though the Bible compares His work to the rush of wind—unpredictable, and mysterious). The King James Bible translates the Hebrew "Ruach" as "Holy Ghost," but the Spirit is not a 'spook' either. Like Jesus, He is God, and can think, will and feel. He possesses all the attributes of a personality: intellect, emotion and will. The Scriptures testify that God's Spirit can be grieved, quenched, stifled, and ignored. He 'inspires' people to say what God wants them to say, or to write down those messages.

And Jesus said that the Spirit would guide us into the truth about Christ, about our sinfulness – and the consequences thereof. It is He who convicts us of our need for Jesus, and draws us to Christ's saving mercy. *After* we become Christians, the Spirit helps us to pray (Rom. 8:26), to communicate to others about Christ (Mk. 13:11), to do what is right (1 Jn. 2:27), and above all, to love others (Gal. 5:22).<sup>5</sup> Paul wrote that there are many amazing manifestations of the Spirit—such as praying or prophesying in tongues, being able to heal or do miracles—but that the Spirit's best gifts are faith, hope, and love, with love as the greatest of all (1 Cor. 13).

So how are we filled with the Holy Spirit? When you become a Christian, God's Spirit enters yours, and He will never leave you. He is your inner guest, permanently: You've allowed him through the front door, and the rest of your Christian life is the process of letting Him take over every room in your house. Are you supposed to 'feel' anything when the Spirit comes into your life? Yes and no. Some do, some don't. Some believers have a 'peak experience' of extreme transformation that is quite powerful. One only has to think of St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. For others, an awareness of the Holy Spirit at work in them is a slowly growing sense of a positive change in the way they understand, feel about, and live life. Remember, the Spirit operates uniquely in each of us. The Bible says He is like the wind, blowing where He will.<sup>6</sup>

The Holy Spirit is simply God on the move. God acting in your life individually, in the life of our small parish, and in the life of the Church universal, always with great power. St. Paul writes about the Spirit's power within us in Ephesians 3:20, as, the One "who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that energizes us." Yet the Holy Spirit is always a gentleman. He is never wild or untamed: the energy He releases in and through us is controlled and effective, and only does the will of God.

Some Christians are 'high energy' types—we think of heroes of the faith such as St. Paul, John Wesley, or Martin Luther King, Jr. You or I may not feel we are spiritual powerhouses, or have vast energy reserves, but that's OK. Whether the Holy Spirit fills and inspires a fisherman like Simon Peter, or a shoe salesman like D. L. Moody—or a doctor from Howes Cave, or a retired SUNY Cobleskill professor—any Christian can be an effective minister of, and witness for Jesus, as long as he or she is open to God's Spirit working within them.

In his book on the Holy Spirit, Tom Rees writes: “Paul was indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And you too, my Christian friend, believe it or not, are indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. All the resources that Paul had you have. Did I hear you say: ‘Then, if that is true, why is there such a difference between the life Paul lived and the life I live? Why was he so like the Master, and why am I [not]?

Why was Paul so powerful where I am utterly weak and defeated?” Scripture is clear: The greatness of anyone’s power is the measure of his or her *surrender to the Holy Spirit*.<sup>7</sup> And here’s another word to all you who lack energy, from Romans 8:11, “The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you: He who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit who dwells in you!” Moreover, as Paul pep-talked timid Timothy: “God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7).

On that first Pentecost, the Bible says 3,000 people believed and were baptized—but they did not just go home and forget about it! St. Luke records, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer ... Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple ... and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

The question is, how, in our day can we best respond to God’s generous gift of His Holy Spirit to us? First and foremost, we can follow Christ’s example of loving service to others. When the world talks about leadership, we hear words like: Power, influence, leverage. When Jesus speaks of leaders, He uses words like humility, gentleness, patience, compassion, and generosity.

And so, we see the Holy Spirit at work wherever there is caring community. The Spirit is at work wherever there is gratitude, and forgiveness. The Spirit is at work whenever prayers ascend with "sighs too deep for words." The Spirit is at work wherever there is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23), for these are the fruits of the Spirit. And as the prophet Joel declared, the Spirit is at work wherever young men and women prophesy against injustice and see visions of hope, and wherever elders still dream dreams of a better world.<sup>8</sup> And I’m sure that includes some of you sitting here this morning.

Having received God’s Spirit, then, how shall we proceed? As always, one day at a time. Evangelist Chuck Swindoll declares: “Today is unique! It has never occurred before and it will never be repeated. At midnight it will end, quietly, suddenly, totally. Forever. But the hours between now and then are opportunities with eternal possibilities. Times may be hard and people may be demanding, but never forget that life is special. Every single day ... God is at work in you!”<sup>9</sup>

As you go about your daily tasks and activities this coming week, be assured that the Holy Spirit energizes your life with His presence and power, according to your particular needs, and in direct response to how often you call upon and trust Him. ... And before you know it, you might find yourself becoming a “pentecostal”!

Amen?

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Rowland Croucher, “The Holy Spirit’s Gift of Energy,” *John Mark Ministries*, May 2002 <<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/2675.htm>> 22 May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. “United by the Spirit,” *Synthesis, Year C* (23 May 2010), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. Fred B. Craddock, et al. *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year C* (Valley Forge: Trinity 1994), p.273.

<sup>4</sup> *Synthesis, op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Croucher, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Tom Rees, *The Spirit of Life, or Life More Abundant* (H & S, 1961), pp. 127-128.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Gregg, “How the Holy Spirit Moves Today,” *Pathos: Faith Forward*, <<http://www.pathos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/How-the-Holy-Spirit-Moves-Today.html>> 22 May 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Croucher, *op. cit.*