

## Heaven Came Down

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

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Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. [2] And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. [3] Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

[5] Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. [6] And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. [7] Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" [8] And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? [9] Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, [11] Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." [12] All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" [13] But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine. "

[14] But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. [15] Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. [16] No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

[17] 'In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

[18] Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

[19] And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

[20] The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

[21] Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION

One of the local TV channels did a special segment in which they asked leaders from various religions, "How do you get to heaven?" Most religious leaders said that you get to heaven by some combination of faith and works. And, amazingly enough, all of them generally agreed on one point. They described heaven as being in the presence of God.

I wish they had asked me that question. You know what I would have said? I would have said, "That's the wrong question! You shouldn't ask how to get to heaven. You should ask how heaven comes to us."

That's what we believe you know. Christians believe that heaven comes to us. Christians believe that no matter how good we are or how much we go to church or how hard we try to believe the right things it is never enough. Heaven is too high, and we are too low. God is too holy, and we are too unholy. There is a great gulf that separates divinity and humanity.

But, if we define heaven as being in the presence of God, then heaven has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the human face of God. What we could have never known or achieved on our own God has revealed in the man Jesus.

## GOD WAS IN CHRIST

When you think about it, this is the message that we have been proclaiming since the beginning of the church year. In Advent and Christmas we talked about the meaning of the incarnation. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God came down and lived among us.

In Epiphany we talked about how the glory of God was made manifest in Jesus. Some select disciples saw his glory of on the Mount of Transfiguration. And Jesus also revealed God's glory to the world.

Jesus did what only God could do. He miraculously healed the sick, fed the multitudes, commanded the wind and the waves to be still, and even raised the dead. But, more than that, Jesus said what only God could say. He forgave sins and accepted people who were on the fringes of society.

During Lent we walked with Jesus on the way to the cross. We learned that earth did not like this heavenly invasion. God's ways were not our ways, and the powers that be decisively rejected the forgiveness and power of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. They crucified him.

But, during Easter we learned that God's power of God's grace was stronger than even the bond of death. The Savior who was crucified by the people he came to save rose from the dead, and in so doing gave us hope not only for this life but for the life to come.

The Risen Christ appeared to his disciples. At first they didn't believe it could be him. It seemed too good to be true. But, finally he convinced even doubting Thomas that the greatest miracle of all had occurred. Heaven had indeed come to earth in the man Jesus.

## FEARFUL DISCIPLES

But, amazingly enough, even a resurrection was not enough to change the thinking of the disciples. They are portrayed in the Bible as continuing to huddle behind locked doors because they were afraid of those who might do them harm. In John's gospel they return to their old job as fishermen.

In the passage from Acts that precedes our lesson for today the Risen Christ ascends into heaven and the disciples seem to have no clue about what to do or where to go. The Bible says that they continued to gaze vacantly up into heaven until their reverie was interrupted by angels who reminded them that they had places to go and people to see.

To put it another way, for those first disciples, even heaven touching earth was not enough to create faith. Even an appearance of the Risen Christ was not enough to make a difference. The disciples were living out of fear instead of faith.

## HEAVEN CAME DOWN

It was not enough for them to know that Jesus was the way, the truth and the life. Somehow that message from heaven needed to be taken personally. Somehow heaven needed to come down once again and fill their soul.

And today on Pentecost we learn that this is exactly what happened. In Acts 2:2 we read that a wind from heaven entered the house where all the disciples were gathered. Heaven came down, the Spirit of God filled the disciples and God's kingdom came to earth. And despite all the evidence to the contrary, these first disciples believed.

Despite vicious opposition from the religious leaders, despite vicious opposition from the political leaders and despite vicious opposition from the people who called for the crucifixion of Christ, these fearful disciples were given the ability and the courage to preach the gospel.

The violent wind from heaven took over their lives, and the flaming tongue of God's word rested on each of these disciples.

In an instant they became new creations, new men and women who threw caution to the wind and preached in a language that they did not know ... a heavenly language provided by the Holy Spirit.

## A MESSAGE FOR THE WORLD

And this language communicated. The language of heaven was not some far off, esoteric communication. It was a message heard round the world. It was a message for the world.

I think that's why Luke in the book of Acts lists all of the nations represented that day. It was an important statement about heaven. God's love as revealed in Jesus was expanding. Heaven was

not just for a limited number of people from a particular part of the world. Heaven was for the whole world.

The disciples wanted to spend their time gazing off into the wild blue yonder in their quest for heaven. The Spirit of God in Christ focuses their attention squarely back on planet earth and the people of this earth. The people of earth are the people that God loves. The people of earth are the people that Jesus came to heal and forgive and save.

Amazing as it may seem, this creator God whose universe is so great that we can't even see it all with the most powerful telescope is a God who cares about us. He cares about all of us. He cares about Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Puerto Ricans, Germans, Chinese, Russians and the people who struggle in Myanmar just to survive. God cares. God wants to communicate the love of heaven to all of these people.

## SPIRITUAL LANGUAGE

Do you believe that? Do you believe that the love of God is for the whole world? And if you believe that do you believe that God's Spirit still empowers frightened disciple like you and me to carry that message from heaven to the world?

Whenever we study the story of Pentecost someone always brings up the disagreements that we have with the Pentecostals. They ask me, "Pastor, do you really believe in speaking in tongues? Do you really believe that those disciples spoke a Spirit language that was understood by people from all over the world? Is it necessary to speak in tongues in order to be a real Christian?"

It seems to me that this discussion diverts us from the true message of this passage. The important point is not exactly what happened that day but what was accomplished that day. The Spirit from heaven is not the Spirit of confusion. The Spirit from heaven is the Spirit of communication. The Spirit from heaven is not a Spirit of division but a Spirit of unity.

Whatever language those first disciples spoke, it was a word that was understandable.

It wasn't a personal, private revelation. It was a message for a greater audience. The God who is revealed in Jesus through the power of the Spirit is a God who communicates, a God of revelation who desires that all may come to an understanding of the truth.

## THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD

And what is the truth about heaven, the truth about God as revealed in Jesus? God is not out to get anyone. God is out to save everyone. As Peter put it in verse 21 of our lesson for today, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Humans crucify. God resurrects. Humans divide and dominate. God communicates. The world is not what it should be, but today we are reminded that God has the last word. God's word is a

wild word that changes everything. It rebuilds broken communities and breaks down boundaries.

The Spirit of God in Christ is out to bring a message of salvation, a message of forgiveness and healing to the whole wide world, and we have been chosen to help bring that message to the world. We have been chosen to bring heaven down to earth.

A minister who preaches in storefront churches filled with people who live on the fringes of society said that before he asks everyone to greet one another and share the peace of Christ he says something like the following,

“When the Risen Jesus appeared to his disciples they were hiding upstairs in a locked room. These friends who knew him best had betrayed him. They had pretended they didn’t know him. They ran away when they arrested him. They hid when they killed him.

They were frightened and ashamed.

He appeared among them and greeted them. He didn’t say, ‘What happened? Where were you? Who messed up?’

No, he greeted them saying, ‘Peace.’”

The pastor said that the first time he used these words a woman who was addicted to heroin whispered, “That was the first time in so many years that I felt like I was good enough to be part of this.” Over and over again the people shyly approached and let him know that he must keep saying this.

Heaven has come to us, and we are indeed saved by this message of grace and hope. But, the message is not just for us. We are given the message so that we might proclaim it to others.

Wherever people are hurting we are called to proclaim this message. Wherever people feel a real sense of guilt and shame we are called to proclaim this message. Wherever people hear from others, “You’re not good enough. You’re not welcome” we are called to proclaim this message. We are called by the power of the Spirit to bring heaven down to earth. We are called to say what I proclaim every Sunday morning, “Be at peace. In Jesus Christ you are forgiven.”

## HEAVEN SEPARATED FROM EARTH

When we do not do this, when we do not connect the message of heaven to earth, it can be a dangerous thing. There have been many instances in the history of the Christian religion and other religions when our thoughts about heaven have not led to heavenly actions on earth, far from it.

Tragically misguided people led the Inquisition. They thought that they were saving souls for heaven by torturing them into a confession of faith. More recently those crazy people who flew

airplanes into the World Trade Center thought they were doing God's will in their terribly destructive actions. They thought that they were on their way to heaven.

Talk of heaven without earthly definition can (at best) become an excuse for callousness and moral irresponsibility. And at worst heaven can be used as an excuse for the most terrible evil a person can imagine. That's why some atheists contend that religion is not the answer. For them religion is the problem.

I think it all depends upon how you define heaven. If you define heaven as pie in the sky by and by or a reward for doing what a certain religious leader tells you to do, I think it's highly likely that we're not talking about heaven at all but hell waiting to happen.

But, if you define heaven as the very concrete, down to earth revelation of God as revealed in Jesus, then we're talking about the power of God. It is a power that can change things both here and in the hereafter. This Jesus still tells us,

“Peace be with you. You are not accused. You are invited.”

There is spiritual power when people are invited instead of being accused. There is spiritual power when people are given the opportunity to move beyond where they are to where God calls them to be. And in my opinion that's what Pentecost is all about. Pentecost is about the power of God to move people toward heaven in a very practical, earthly way.

#### THE POWER TO TURN ENEMIES INTO BELIEVERS

The results of that first Pentecost were quite spectacular. But, the most amazing thing was not that primal wind that blew for heaven or the tongues of fire or even Galileans being given the ability to communicate the gospel in a foreign tongue. The most amazing thing was the number of people who became disciples of Jesus on that first Pentecost. In Acts 2:41 we learn that 3,000 people were baptized after Peter preached his first sermon.

We might have one or two people join our church every two or three months. Some churches might have four or five join every week. But, have you ever been in a church when 3,000 joined at one time? Even at the largest Billy Graham crusade we don't have that many people coming forward.

Who were these people and why did so many of them become believers? The answer may surprise you. According to Peter, these people were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. (Acts 2:36) These were the people who shouted, “Give us Barabbas.” Peter tells them that they were responsible in some way for the death of Jesus, God's Son the Messiah.

And apparently they accepted Peter's judgment because the Bible tells us they were “cut to the heart” by this pronouncement. In desperation they cried out, “What should we do?” And Peter told them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Their sins would be forgiven and they too would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It happened. Heaven came down and touched these 3,000 who were in some way responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. The first converts in that early church were enemies who had been transformed by the power of God's Spirit. Three thousand enemies became followers of Christ by the power of the Spirit on that first Pentecost.

## PENTECOSTAL POWER TODAY

We all know the story of the first Pentecost. But, do we believe that this still Pentecostal power today? Do we believe that heaven still comes to earth?

When we look around at the world today we might be tempted to say "no." The world is just getting worse and worse some might say. People are more divided than ever. Maybe the best we can do is just hang in there and wait for the kingdom that comes.

But, Jesus didn't allow those first disciples to do that, and he doesn't allow us to do it either. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he taught them to pray "thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In other words, in the model prayer Jesus taught his disciples to connect heaven and earth. God's kingdom was not just about what was to come. God's kingdom was about what was happening here and now.

This is indeed an audacious prayer. In a world where victims of a terrible hurricane cannot be helped because their own government will not let aid workers into the country, how can we pray, "Thy kingdom come?" In a world where terrorists blow up innocent civilians in the name of God how can we pray, "Thy kingdom come?"

When our personal world tumbles down and the person we love the most leaves us, how can we pray, "Thy kingdom come?" When we betray what we believe in most deeply and disappoint the one we love the most, how can we pray, "Thy kingdom come?"

We are tempted to believe that maybe heaven doesn't come down to earth any more. Maybe Pentecostal power is a thing of the past. You might even say, "Pastor if you believe heaven can come down to this earth in our evil world, you must be drunk. You've been hitting the scotch and water too early this morning."

And I would say, "Friends, it's too early to drink and besides that the bars aren't open on Sunday morning!"

But, of course not everyone will be convinced by what I have to say. There are always some who think that the leopard can't change his spots, that enemies will always be enemies and that those who have made their bed of shame have to lie in it forever.

But, there are others who believe that the walls of division can be torn down, and people can change. There are others who believe that there is even one powerful enough to say to those who are crippled by life, "Take up your bed and walk."

These are the ones who are drunk in the Spirit. These are the ones who have the audacity to speak the language of hope in a world of despair. These are the ones who are filled with the Spirit of God in Christ.

It is not the power of positive thinking; it is the power of God come to earth. It is a wind of change that is as strong as creation and as broad as the heavens.

Call me a dreamer or a drunk if you will, but I believe that it is still true. Heaven still comes down to earth. People are still given the gift of understanding the truth about God. Enemies of the gospel are converted to the cause of Christ. Broken people are still healed.

In my youth I was part of a community wide revival choir. Every week all the churches of our city gathered at the high school for evangelistic services and each night we started the service with our theme song, "Heaven Came Down." I can still remember the chorus, "Heaven came down, and glory filled my soul."

I believe the song is true, and I believe that it still happens. The words of the apostle Peter to that first congregation of believers are as true today as it was then. Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. May heaven come down and fill our souls this very day, and may that heavenly power influence how we live and how we treat others here on earth.  
Amen.

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