Our text this morning is Acts 2:37-41. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” 38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” 40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” 41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

When the crowds in Jerusalem are convicted by the Gospel on the day of Pentecost, they cry out, “What shall we do?” Peter replies with two mandates and two promises when he says, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” So far we have given a few weeks to unpack the meaning of repentance and baptism. This morning we will consider the two promises made by Peter. 1) that those who repent and submit to baptism in the name of Jesus Christ can be assured their sins are forgiven; and 2) those who repent and submit to baptism in the name of Jesus Christ will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Before I launch into the promises made by Peter on this historic day of Pentecost, let me remind you of the context. Remember that just a few weeks earlier in this very same city, many of these same people had called for the release of the murderer Barrabas and then demanded the execution of Jesus from Nazareth. Though the Roman governor named Pilate had declared Jesus innocent following his trial, the crowds threatened to riot if they did not get their way. Finally Pilate conceded, and Jesus…an innocent man…was brutally flogged and nailed to a wooden cross where he died just hours later. The following Sunday morning, the tomb in which Jesus had been laid…a very public tomb that belonged to a wealthy citizen of Jerusalem…was found to be empty. The embalmed body of Jesus was missing. No doubt it took little time for the word of the empty tomb to sweep through the city. Rumors spread, theories were put forth, and there were some who believed that Jesus had risen.

Now, on this day of Pentecost in Acts 2, several weeks have gone by. The body of Jesus has still not been found, and the rumor of his resurrection is spreading. Hundreds of people are talking about having seen Jesus alive, though the disciples from Galilee who followed Jesus into the city

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just over a month ago have all but disappeared from the public realm. That is until today. According to Luke, on this day of Pentecost, near an upper room somewhere in the city, there has been a sound—a powerful, daunting sound like a mighty rushing wind... a strange light has come upon some 120 disciples of Jesus in the room in which they have been gathered for several days now. With this sound and light there is super natural power that courses through the disciples of Jesus. They begin to publicly proclaim the mighty works of God in every language under the sun...languages they could not possibly know given their humble backgrounds and limited education. Imagine if you will a group of 120 men and women loudly proclaiming the goodness of God in myriads of languages all at the same time. It would be a spectacle to behold, and in no time, a large crowd has gathered to inquire about the ruckus. It is then that Peter, the boldest of the disciples, stands up and delivers a simple yet powerful proclamation. He quotes the prophet Joel and says in no uncertain terms: now begins the end of the age, when the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh, and those who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved from God’s wrath on the day of judgment that is soon to come. He then teaches that Jesus is Lord as evidenced by his powerful words and deeds, his sacrificial death, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension to the right hand of God the Father. He concludes his sermon with these words, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Luke then reports in vs. 37, “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart...” Why? Why were so many cut to the heart? Why were they devastated? Why were they moved to ask the question, “What shall we do?”

The simple answer is this: many were devastated when they saw their sin. They came under a conviction that they stood condemned for the murder of an innocent man...and not just any innocent man. They stood condemned for the murder of Israel’s long awaited Messiah, their King, who was this Jesus of Nazareth whom they had crucified.

Their heart-felt conviction reveals more than an acknowledgment of guilt. There would also seem to be an awakening...a dawning of truth that begins to reveal the lies that had led them to crucify their King. They are beginning to see clearly for the first time in their lives. Everything they had ever learned, ever experienced...everything they had structured their lives around began to be both destroyed and rebuilt at the same time. The pieces of the puzzle called their existence and their identity began to come together into a whole new picture of reality...one that was both horrifying, and at the same time strangely hopeful. Hopeful because they are now beginning to realize that God is present, that God has acted in history, that God fulfilled His promise by sending His Messiah, and yet horrifying that they had a hand in murdering the Christ of God. They are hopeful in that this Jesus whom they crucified is no longer in the tomb...the rumors of his triumph over the grave are true...which means the Messiah of God is truly the high and mighty King whose kingdom shall not end...not now...not ever. Yet they are horrified because
they are currently guilty of treason against their King. So this strange combination of horror and hope leads to a sincere moment of urgent inquiry, “What shall we do?” In other words, what can be done? Is there any hope for us? Is the damage too great, are we doomed? Or is there still time, is there some way we can make things right with the King before His judgment comes upon us?

By the way, this is always what happens when we are confronted by the Gospel and we come under conviction through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is horrible and wonderful all at the same time, and it always leads us to ask, “What shall we do?”

Peter responds, “Repent.” Repentance always comes first. Turn back to God, be heartbroken and contrite about your sins and your condition; turn away from your path of destruction and lay yourself broken and submitted before Christ the King. Then submit yourself to being baptized, immersed in the name of Jesus Christ…for in Him your sins will be forgiven. The forgiveness of sins is the first promise of the Gospel.

This word for forgiveness in the Greek is the word “aphesis.” Throughout the Old Testament as well as in the the Greek culture the word meant “to release from legal or moral obligation or consequence, cancel, remit, pardon.” The promise Peter makes to the convicted crowd in Jerusalem is this: that in Jesus Christ, their debts would be considered “paid in full” in the eyes of God. Their sins would be pardoned…even the sin of murdering their King.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine having a debt so great…a debt beyond comprehension…a debt that required more than your measly life to satisfy…a debt that would cost not only your life but the life of every person you love? That’s the picture here. To murder a King in the ancient world would not only be punished by the execution of the murderer, but often that person’s entire family as well. And yet Peter, filled with the power of God’s Holy Spirit, states clearly: Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. The first and greatest promise of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven…they are removed from God’s sight…never again to be held against us. That is IF we will simply repent and call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ faith. Thus our salvation depends upon Him…not us. Our hope is in Him…not our own goodness. Our confidence is in what Jesus accomplished, not in what we have accomplished. The Apostle Paul will sum that mystery up in Ephesians 2 where he writes, “We are saved by grace through faith… so that no man may boast.”

Forgiveness of sins is not the only promise that Peter makes on this day of Pentecost…there is another. Peter promises that once the forgiveness of sins becomes the new status of the believer, a new gift is given. The gift is the Holy Spirit
Now, what is the gift of the Holy Spirit? Jesus said that at the minimum, the gift of the Holy Spirit would bring power to the believers. Remember that Jesus promised the disciples in Acts 1:5 that though John baptized with water, very soon they would be “baptized by the Holy Spirit.” Then Jesus promises in Acts 1:8 that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Now Jesus said a lot about the Holy Spirit, and we’ve covered some of this ground in the past, but let me point you back to John 16 where Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as “the Helper.” He says the Helper, the Spirit of truth, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. He will guide people into all the truth and declare the things that are to come. The Holy Spirit will glorify Christ and take what belongs to Christ and make it known to the believers. Jesus promises in John 14 that the Holy Spirit will be known only to believers and will dwell with them and be IN them. Jesus says in John 14:24, “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and bring to remembrance all that I have said to you.”

So, the gift of the Holy Spirit should bring power, truth, conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment. The gift of the Holy Spirit should lead to spiritual knowledge and ever increasing intimacy with Christ and all that belongs to Christ. And the Holy Spirit in us should serve to always remind us of the Gospel and the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Now, to be sure, this promise regarding the “gift of the Holy Spirit” is yet another doctrine that can and has caused considerable debate in the church. The debate usually revolves around the relationship between baptism by water, baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. I don’t want to go deep into this debate, but it is helpful to understand the debate because it drives us back into scripture to discern what we can about this very important promise made by Peter on the day of Pentecost.

Most Pentecostal traditions will insist that to be baptized by the Holy Spirit comes at a time other than when we are baptized with water, and the primary sign that one has been baptized in the Holy Spirit is that the believer is given the power to speak in tongues. They will point to the disciples on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 who speak in foreign languages after receiving the Holy Spirit. They will point to Acts 10:44-47 when Peter is preaching to Cornelius and his household. We read in vs. 44ff, “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” They will also point to Acts 19:6 when Paul instructs some disciples of John the Baptist, then baptizes them in the name of Jesus Christ. After which he lays hands on them “and the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.” Because of these three stories, the Pentecostals generally insist that those who
have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, or those who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, will have a powerful experience and will inevitably then praise the Lord through speaking in tongues.

Most Evangelical Protestant traditions, however, will insist that the Holy Spirit is given to every believer at the moment that they make a confession of faith and/or when they are baptized, and that there is not necessarily a relationship between receiving the Holy Spirit and experiencing the Holy Spirit. Whereas the Pentecostals would say that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a fact of experience, many Evangelical Protestants would argue that the gift of the Holy Spirit is a fact of doctrine, irrespective of experience.

Now…how should we to think about the “baptism of the Holy Spirit?” I will make this quick, but let me first offend both camps. First, in a gentle response to our Pentecostal friends, I think it is biblically inaccurate to assume that tongues always accompanies the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells nine other conversion stories in Acts (8:36; 9:17–19; 13:12, 48; 14:1; 16:14; 17:4, 34) and never once again mentions tongues. No one in the NT ever teaches that tongues should always be expected to follow the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and Paul even states in 1 Corinthians 12:30 that “not all speak in tongues.” Whenever Paul mentions tongues, he almost always lists tongues as one of many expressions or gifts of the Spirit, and though highly esteemed, tongues is certainly not presented as essential or even normative.

Now, in response to the doctrinally oriented Evangelical camp, I must contest the notion that we can boil down the baptism of the Holy Spirit to a doctrinal reality irrespective of experience. I would have to agree with our Pentecostal brothers that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is always presented in the Bible as a powerful, life changing experience for believers. I suspect receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is clearly not something we would forget or miss. So how can we know if we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit? I’m quite certain many people will be asking me that question after the service and through email all week long.

First, know this: no one can come to Christ unless God calls that person to Himself through the work of the Holy Spirit. As our friend John Piper writes, “We do not initiate our salvation by believing. God initiates it by enabling us to believe (Ephesians 2:8–9; 2 Timothy 2:25; John 1:13).” So even having conviction of sin and calling upon the name of Jesus to be saved is evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in us. Be encouraged…if you have any faith at all in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has worked in you to make that reality come to pass.

However, we should not confuse the work of the Holy Spirit with the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” I do think there is a difference. The Holy Spirit can and often does work on us and even through us as God wills, and though that is a mystery, it can hardly be compared to what Jesus promises when He says, “You will be receive POWER when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses to the whole world.” The crowd in Jerusalem could easily observe
the power of God pulsing through the disciples in Acts 2, particularly Peter as he boldly preaches to thousands in Jerusalem…the same Peter who was too cowardly to identify with Jesus a few weeks ago and even denied knowing Him three times in one night. You see, there is no explanation for that transformation, that boldness, and that power other than Peter had received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The power was obvious, both for Peter and for those who were observing Peter.

Let’s not make Jesus out to be a liar. If we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, if we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, there should be power…real, actual power from God that empowers us to be witnesses to a watching world. If we have no power, we should ask God for a fresh anointing, a renewed gift of the Holy Spirit. Remember, Jesus said in no uncertain terms that God delights in providing the Holy Spirit for his children who ask for the Holy Spirit.

We’ll see the power of the Holy Spirit working through the disciples all throughout Acts, so we’ll return to this theme from time to time. Let me close with a warning for all of us regarding the gift of the Holy Spirit, and here it is: do not overestimate the importance of experience when it comes to the Holy Spirit, and do not underestimate the importance of experience when it comes to the Holy Spirit!

First, we must not overemphasize the importance of “experience” when it comes to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Many people who find themselves comfortably settled in a Presbyterian church like ours have come seeking refuge from traditions that overemphasized the “experience” of God’s Holy Spirit. I’ve heard many stories of charismatic churches where certain “signs and wonders” were expected to be present, where people constantly had “dreams and visions,” where prophetic words were pronounced on a daily basis, and before long it became assumed that if you were not having these experiences, you were deemed unsaved or in some way unfaithful. In the worst situations, church leaders even manipulated people financially or sexually through their “experiences” of the Holy Spirit. I suspect for those here this morning who have come from such backgrounds, the mere mention of “baptism in the Holy Spirit” makes you shudder and look for the exit signs.

Listen, the two most obvious, biblical manifestations of the Holy Spirit that are always found in the Bible are this: witness and obedience. When the gift of the Holy Spirit comes, people praise God with passion and boldness, and they bear witness…they simply cannot stop themselves. Now how people worship, and how people bear witness can vary a great deal depending upon personalities and traditions, but we should not expect that every person receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit will have similar dramatic stories featuring miracles, dreams, healings, or even speaking in tongues. The power of the Holy Spirit also enables and inclines believers to obey Jesus. A lot of times, that change of behavior will seem sudden to those who are on the outside looking in. True obedience to God is something we must be given power to do…obedience is
never something we can do by our own power. If you see your desires changing, and you can hardly bring yourself to think about doing those things that offend God like you used to, I can just about guarantee that you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit...there really is no other explanation for radical obedience.

Which leads me to say, we must not underestimate the importance of experience when it comes to the gift of the Holy Spirit. I suspect that every believer who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit will be able to point to certain times in their lives when they received power that was beyond themselves—a power from God that allowed them to both to bear witness to God and obey God in ways that exceeded their natural talents or gifting.

I have experienced that kind of power on many occasions in my life, and it’s almost always when I’ve trusted God to step into an environment that made me incredibly uncomfortable! Whether it was speaking to 4000 Kenyans in Nairobi for the first time, or engaging a total stranger sitting next to me on an airplane with the Gospel...I have stories and experiences that point to the gift of the Holy Spirit—and those stories increase my faith and my confidence that the One who lives in me is stronger than the one who lives the world.

If you have no such experiences at this point in your life...if you cannot recall the last time you felt power GIVEN to you by God to obey Him and to be His witness...perhaps you have not received the gift of the Holy Spirit. So what should you do?

First, consider the gospel, and receive the gospel! Until we are cut to the heart by the stain of our sin and the deep, deep love of Jesus, we might be religious, but we are not repentant. Remember, repentance follows heart conviction, and repentance opens the door to the forgiveness of sins through our faith in Jesus Christ. Start there. If you have never been baptized, obedience to our King requires that we submit ourselves to baptism by water as a sign and seal that we belong to Jesus. Finally, if you are still uncertain, trust Jesus and simply ask the Father for the gift that He promised His disciples. Jesus is not a liar. He promised that the Holy Spirit would come upon us, and He promised that when that happened...we would receive power!

I will close with this prayer from the Apostle Paul that is found in Ephesians 3:

“...I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ—that you might know His love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Amen

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