

Last week we celebrated Jesus' ascension into heaven. At that time he gave the disciples a special commission, a Great Commission, to go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and teaching them the things they had witnessed with Jesus. As they watched him disappear into the clouds above, I imagine his words lingered in their minds and hearts until they day they died, **"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."**

Even though Jesus would ascend to heaven visibly, he would still be with them. Not just when they felt like he was there or when their faith was extra strong, but *always*. But we've seen how slow to understand the disciples often were. Jesus was aware of that, too, long before he ascended into heaven. That's why, in our gospel lesson for today, he told them that one day the Counselor would come to remind them of all these things. Jesus would send the Holy Spirit, **"...from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.<sup>27</sup> And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning,"** (John 15).

They would testify. They had been with him from the beginning of his earthly ministry. They had heard and seen him with their own eyes and ears. And although they were ordinary, unschooled men whose on-the-job training hadn't always gone so smoothly, Jesus chose them to be his witnesses to the nations. And one day, he would send the Holy Spirit to fill them with power to proclaim and prophecy his word. This would be one more sign and visible proof that he was still with them, just as he promised.

I wonder what those first ten days were like for them after Jesus ascended. We're told that they continued to gather together to worship and to pray. They talked about what Jesus had done and what he had told them they would do. The reality of Jesus' physical absence must have been tough, though. They wondered if they were really prepared to carry on the work he called them to do. They remembered the warnings he gave them that it wouldn't be easy, that people would hate them to the point of wanting them dead. The private room where they were gathering seemed to feel more and more comfortable and safe, a good place for the nations to come if they really wanted to know about Jesus.

Come to think of it, who were *they* really to go to the nations? It would be one thing if Jesus was right there with them to get them through the tough scrapes and situations. And maybe we can understand how these disciples would have felt a little overwhelmed and apprehensive about their commission. It wasn't too clear how *they* could do any of what Jesus had said.

But on the day of Pentecost, it became crystal clear. **"<sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."** The sound of a violent wind, the tongues of fire, and the speaking in foreign languages – these signs led the disciples to realize that this is what Jesus meant. The Counselor had come to bring everything into sharp focus. They knew in that moment, no longer any doubts, that they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, starting right there in the Jerusalem.

You see the hand of God at work here, too. These apostles couldn't have asked for a more ideal situation to begin their commission. Jews and other converts to Judaism from Africa, Asia and Europe had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks. It was also known as Pentecost to the Jewish people, because it was 50 days after the first Sabbath of the Passover. When they heard the commotion, the sound of a violent wind emanating from the place where the disciples were gathered, they went to take a look. **"<sup>7</sup> Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?"** They wondered, **"Who are these guys prophesying in God's name?"**

By outward appearances, the twelve apostles didn't look like much. Except for the fact that each of them was speaking in a foreign language like a native speaker, these men had no apparent qualifications or titles to distinguish them as prophets of the Lord. Some of the crowd took exception to what was going on, so much so that they tried to pass the whole thing off as a sort of frat party gone horribly wrong. **"Aw, these guys have just been hitting the wineskins too hard."**

But that wasn't the case at all. What the disciples were saying and how they said lent to the fact that they were completely sober and aware of what they were saying. Peter stood up boldly addressing the crowd, referring to the prophecy of Joel (2:28-32). **"<sup>17</sup> In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. <sup>18</sup> Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."**

When Jesus completed his work of redemption, that's when the end times began that Joel prophesied about, and they will end when Jesus returns in glory. During this time, God said he would pour out his Spirit on all people, literally "all flesh." He would pour out his Spirit, not just on the disciples on the day of Pentecost or on one particular nation, but on all flesh. Jesus repeated that truth in the Great Commission to baptize and teach his word to all nations. The day of Pentecost with the twelve apostles was only the beginning. God has continued to pour out his Spirit into the hearts of sinners all over the world, creating and strengthening faith through his word and sacraments. These have been the tools that Jesus left his disciples to carry on the task of making disciples of all nations, young and old alike, "...**and they will prophesy.**"

I don't normally use that word 'prophesy' when describing what I do as a pastor, or as a Christian. I 'teach' or 'preach,' I 'counsel' or just 'talk about' Jesus. But to think of myself as someone who 'prophesies' might seem a little presumptuous. To some it might imply that I think I'm some sort of prophet, and a prophet is someone who speaks the word of the Lord... Come to think of it, that *is* what I'm called to do: to speak the word of the Lord – to prophesy.

Based on that definition then, that prophesying is really speaking the word of the Lord, wouldn't that apply to you, too? Granted, you may not be a pastor or teacher who teaches or preaches God's word publicly. But through your baptism, through faith, God has poured out his Spirit on you. By his grace he has made you his sons and daughters equipped to prophesy, to show and tell others about your Savior.

You prophesy to others about your Savior in those private moments of give-and-take between husband and wife, friends, co-workers, schoolmates. As a family of believers we 'prophesy' to one another by listening and supporting, even correcting one another when necessary. Most importantly we encourage each other with the good news that of God's love and forgiveness, to assure one another that our Lord Jesus is with you always. Your language, the way you speak, the way you communicate with others (texting, Facebook, email); the faithful effort you put forth in your personal responsibilities and the kindness you show to others – in these ways you prophesy the love of God that overflows from the heart into your words and actions.

Sometimes it's a little scary to think of ourselves as witnesses prophesying for God. It's not always so clear in the way we live our lives or in the way we speak to or talk about one another. You know your own thoughts and desires, and you're faced with your own imperfection and failures. Are you really ready for Christ's return?

Your sinful nature makes a pretty strong argument against your worthiness, too: "*Just look at your sinful heart and life! It would be better to keep your mouth shut before some finds out you're supposed to be a Christian. What? Against the backdrop of your inconsistent, so called 'Christian life,' whatever you could say in the name of Christ probably comes off as hypocritical.*" You know your own faults and failures, and we're left wondering, "*Who am I to prophesy?*"

There's some truth to those accusations: your inconsistent living, your hypocritical heart, your unworthy words. None of us deserves to represent God. And the sinful nature wants us to leave it at that, to focus on our unworthiness and to give up on the thought of being God's witnesses. Satan wants us to lose sight of Christ and what he's accomplished – his perfect living, his selfless heart, his powerful, life-giving words. We can lose sight of Jesus and forget the true source of our worthiness and our ongoing source of power to be God's witnesses. We let our sinful win when we think, "I'm just not cut out for this prophesying business anyway." And for this weakness and failure, we deserve God's punishment.

But one thing Peter and the other apostles understood, especially on that day of Pentecost, was that their ability to prophesy and to be Jesus' witnesses had nothing to do with their personal strength of character or qualifications. It was always about the grace of God, because of which he sent his Spirit on Pentecost. That powerful event once again underscores the truth of all his promises for those twelve men and for all of us believers here today. The fact is God empowers ordinary, sinful people to proclaim and prophesy the holy truth of his love for all people, even for us. Because of his great love, God's Son came to live and die to pay for the sins of the world, for me and for you. His resurrection from the grave shows his power and victory over sin and death, and through faith we are convinced that Jesus died for all and that he has made us worthy to proclaim and prophesy his love as we await his great and glorious return.

As you remember the events of this special day called Pentecost, take to heart the fact that he has poured his Holy Spirit into your heart and mind through faith. Grow in his grace and knowledge, always relying and making use of the word and sacraments. Trust in the free and full forgiveness that Christ has won for you. Because of Jesus, you are worthy to prophesy the truth in his name. As you look forward to that great and glorious day of his return, remember that his Spirit is at work in you, filling you with his peace and comfort. Encourage one another as the day approaches, so that in everything we say and do we bear witness and prophesy God's love for the salvation of many souls. Amen.