

Pentecost 2024
Gen. 11 & Acts 2 (ESV)

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Lord's blessings to all of you, dear ones, on this day of Pentecost. And what an excellent day it is.

As some of you may well know, the Greek word for Pentecost literally means "fiftieth." And in the Old Testament, the people of God were commanded to hold a feast on the fiftieth day after the Passover. For them, Pentecost was a harvest feast, celebrating the completion of the grain harvest, the in-gathering of crops from the fields *and* the in-gathering of the Lord's people from all over—from wherever they were dispersed and scattered about, near or far. Together, as one people, at this appointed time every year, they would all be gathered to offer sacrifices to God.

All over, God's people were animated and even driven to do this with excitement and anticipation brought about by the Spirit in keeping with His Word. There was a real longing for these things stirred up within His faithful people. It was in the air. And like the wind kindling sparks into a flame, the Spirit of God kindled in their hearts a holy love for Him and one another, and together they burned with desire to be built up together in Him as one.

And surely you can see, then, dear ones, how these things prefigured the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit fifty days after the sacrifice of the true Passover Lamb, our Lord Jesus, and how the great in-gathering of the New Testament Church would begin with the Holy Spirit working through the Apostles as they preached the holy Gospel.

But what we should also see both in the New Testament and in the Old is how Satan, the evil spirit and the prince of the power of the air, looks to ape and imitate the Lord—how the devil kindles and animates the sinful hearts of fallen men with false preachers, a false gospel, and in this way gathers and builds up a false church.

We see this quite clearly in our Old Testament lesson with the tower of Babel. In those days, the whole earth had one language and the same words. And almost everyone was animated and consumed with one spirit of rebellion against the will of God. It was in the air. For God had commanded Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, to bring the name of the Lord in and among them to the far reaches of all the world.

But what instead did so many resolve to do, dear ones? They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly"—the burned bricks of clay becoming images of their hearts enflamed with desires contrary to God's will and being hardened in this state, all of them joining themselves together as one in their idolatry.

"Come," they said. "Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

And I'm sure you'll have no trouble imagining all the false apostles raised up by the devil and what their false gospel was like, which inspired the masses to do such things. "Never mind

honoring the name and the will of the Lord that we disperse and devote ourselves to His purposes. No. Let's make one great city where we'll establish peace and security for ourselves. Let's build a colossal tower and have it be our temple reaching up into the heavens and all of us taking our seat there as gods. The future is ours for the making, and we'll make a name for ourselves instead of calling on the name of another. What perverse spirit would make you think otherwise?"

Dear ones, it was an evil time in those days not unlike our own, especially as we prepare to enter pride month in a couple of weeks and see signs of rebellion and apostasy all over. Well, in the days of old, God certainly visited the world in judgment. And He divided the language of all the earth, which in turn divided men's hearts against one another, and the effect of this has continued on to this very day.

But, let me ask you, how do you think righteous Noah felt watching all of this take place in his own day—watching as his descendants rush headlong into such rebellion and apostasy and judgment? For 350 years *after* the flood, Noah endured this and preached against it to no avail (cf. 2 Pet. 2:5). We make much of the fact that Noah preached for 120 years before the flood and only a few were saved on the ark (cf. Gen. 6:3). But we don't often take into account as well that after the flood, the Scriptures say (Gen. 9:28) Noah lived 350 years and watched as his progeny slid into apostasy and revolt against God. As Dr. Luther himself says, what patience we could learn from the example of this great saint as he preached against what they were doing for so long.

And if you'll permit me to speak very candidly, I'd commend a word of exhortation to all of you, dear ones, with friends and family over whom you grieve and agonize because they've departed from the Gospel and the true Church and have embraced a false one.

There is always room for us to mourn over our sins and failures as parents and friends of others. There's always room for us to do this even if we know we've made a good faith effort to warn them and urge them to return to the Lord and be reconciled to Him in Christ, but all of it fell on deaf ears in the end. We rightly repent and call upon the name of the Lord for mercy just the same. And you should know there is grace and forgiveness for you and for me under the cross of Christ. Be sure of that, dear ones.

But to agonize endlessly and say, "what if I had just said things more winsomely or just pleaded with them a little more or a little less? Maybe then they wouldn't have turned away," dear ones, this is exactly where the devil wants you, to make you doubt and despair, to get you thinking that you and you alone are the root cause of their sin and rebellion.

But as the Scriptures and the Lutheran confessions teach (AC XIX), the cause of sin is, first and foremost, the devil, who lies and deceives, and also the perverse will of men, whose hearts are enflamed with wicked passions and of their own choosing they decide to rebel against the Lord.

Nor, I should say, are the faithful prophets or priests throughout the Scriptures to blame for such rebellion when they publicly rebuked God's people for their unfaithfulness, but they

paid no heed. Nor are Pastors to blame when they act in good faith according to their God-given duty and authority to call people to repentance and faith, like St. Peter in his sermon on Pentecost whose words cut his hearers to the heart. He was right to do this.

When faithfully carrying out the duties of their office, Pastors themselves are not to blame for people rebelling against the Lord any more than a physician is responsible for the poor health of his patient when he gives him a grim diagnosis and tries to take corrective action. Who among us would say to our doctor, “You are the cause of my lung cancer because you’ve pointed it out to me and urged me to quit smoking. How dare you do this to me and cause me such grief about my health. You, sir, are to blame for this terrible condition of mine”?

No, dear ones, far be it from us to think this way. Far be it from us. But let us instead fix our hearts and minds on the great hope and consolation we’re given on this great day of Pentecost. Because in these last days, the Holy Spirit has been poured out just as Christ our Lord promised.

And beginning with the Apostles, on whom tongues of fire rested long ago, the preaching of the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ has continued to go forth unto all the earth to save those who are lost, even to this very day. Because as He swore with an oath, our gracious Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that they return to Him and live (Ezek. 33:11), even those dear to us and who once knew Him, but who’ve now chosen to go their own way.

Even to this very day, the Spirit of God is kindling the hearts of men from every tribe and tongue with true Christian love for God and neighbor in the knowledge that by faith in Jesus, we now have forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation—that we’ve been called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit with the whole Christian Church as the temple of the living God. And together we’ve become living stones being built up with one another in Christ, the cornerstone.

And I’ll leave you with this thought today, dear ones: how glorious it will be in the kingdom of God in the age to come when we feast together with people from far away and distant lands who heard and believed in the Gospel because of the missionaries we’ve supported in this congregation and because of all the work of our board of missions and evangelism which the Spirit used to gather wayward, rebellious people into the Church, when they’d otherwise be lost forever. What a day that will be. May God grant that it would come quickly.

And to Christ be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.