

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Pentecost: Beginning, Middle or End?”
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Acts 2:1-21, 37-42, Genesis 1:1-8

I want to begin this morning with a snippet of a song from a little known children's show called Sesame Street. I do so because, well because it sets the table for our text. Here it is. “This is the very beginning. This is the once upon a time. Somebody's starting something. These are the opening lines. Seymour is waking up. He's wearing striped pajamas. He's jumping out of bed, all smiles and yells, “This is the beginning.” Yes, every story has a beginning, middle and an end. And when it's over we can go back and tell it all again.” Yes every story has a beginning, a middle and an end. So the question this morning is where do we find our Pentecost story? Is it a beginning, a middle or an end? In order to get your input we will take a poll. All for beginning? All for middle? All for an end? Great...so who is right? Which is it? The answer is...it is all of those things; a beginning, a middle and an end. So you are all correct.

Pentecost is a beginning. It is the beginning of the church, of the called and sent out Jesus people. Though the church is the expansion of the children of Abraham, Pentecost is the founding of a new kind of community. Pentecost is an ending. It is the ending of Jesus' physical ministry and the ending of a community in which only those who were Jewish were welcome. Each of those ways of seeing Pentecost, as a beginning and an ending, are fairly well known and accepted. What I want to do though is to talk about Pentecost as the middle; as the middle of the entire Biblical story. But before we look at that, a brief recap. For those of you who are here on a regular basis you have heard me talk about the fact that the Bible is a single story with a beginning, a middle and an end. What is fascinating about that idea is that the Spirit is present at each of those three moments. It is present at the beginning when the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of creation. In other words the Spirit was a co-creator with God. The Spirit is at the end of the scripture in the book of Revelation when in Chapter 22 we read, “The Spirit and the Bride (meaning the church) say, “Come.”” This is the call to Jesus to recreate the world.

Finally, the Spirit is at the middle. I realize that for many of us, when we think of the middle of the scriptures what we think of is Jesus. There is the Old Testament, filled with messianic predictions and the servant songs of Isaiah, all leading up to Jesus. Then there is the story of the church in Acts, filled with Peter, Paul and their adventures, leading away from Jesus. Therefore, we see Jesus as the pivot upon which the entire story moves. Yet, what I want to offer you today is that perhaps we ought to see Pentecost, the arrival of the Spirit to the disciples, as the true middle of the book...and here's why and it has to do with potential energy. Now, being in a room full of engineers I ought to walk carefully when using terms of physics, however I will do my best to use terms we can all understand...and then all of you engineers can tell me later how I did not get it right. But for now, just go with me. So what is potential energy? It is the energy that children have when they have been cooped up too long. It is energy that is stored in a stretched spring, ready to be released. It is the energy that has yet to be set free to become kinetic energy.

What I mean by all of this is that the work of Jesus on the cross, and the life transforming power of this resurrection, were stored as potential spiritual energy. We can see this in the story that Amy talked about last week. Jesus had died for the sins of the world. Jesus had been raised and the power of death had been broken. Yet, nothing had really changed. The disciples were the same old guys and gals they had always been. They were afraid. They had gone back to their old ways of life. But then came Pentecost. Then came the Spirit and the Spirit took that potential energy of what God had created through the death and resurrection of Jesus and unleashed it on the unsuspecting disciples. The result of which is that the disciples are shot out of that upper room and out into the melee of the Jewish festival of Pentecost. And this Spirit energy did not stop there. It was poured out into the lives of thousands of people in the streets. And that the Spirit did not stop there. It sent men and women out into the Roman world telling people all about Jesus. It sent men and women like Paul and Barnabas out into harm's way to establish churches and change lives.

The gift of the Spirit for us is that unlike the energy of a spring which quickly diminishes, or of children who finally get tired and fall asleep, the energy of the Spirit continues unabated. This is why the church in Africa, Asia and the Americas is growing exponentially. This is why we had such marvelous confirmation statements last week. This is why we are here. We are here because the Spirit drew us here. We are here because the Spirit changed our hearts. We are here because the power unleashed on Pentecost is still at work in the world. What that means for us is that as members of the body of Christ we are not simply members of a religious organization. We are men, women and children whose lives have been touched by the very power of the Holy Spirit. We are Pentecost people. The challenge then is for us to unleash this power in our daily lives; unleash it in such a way that it touches the lives of others, through what we do and what we say.

The challenge then for this Pentecost week is to ask whether we will allow this Spirit power to get bottled up as potential spiritual energy, or whether we will allow it to push us out into a hurting world in order to make a difference for God; to make a difference for Jesus Christ. My question to you this week then is this, "How am I allowing the Spirit of God to not only help to transform this world, but to tell others about this amazing energy in Jesus that can be theirs as well.