

VISIONS, DREAMS, WONDERS, SIGNS

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Pentecost Sunday, May 22, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today, Christians around the world mark the anniversary of Pentecost, the day when the first Christians experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and began their worldwide witness to Christ. Before Jesus died, he gathered his followers and told them that soon he would leave them. But he wouldn't leave them alone. He promised that the Holy Spirit would come to take his place - to guide them, teach them, give them power to witness, and fill them with Christ's peace and joy.

After his resurrection Jesus ordered his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father, referring to the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

God chose to fulfill his promise on the day of Pentecost, ten days after Christ's ascension, and fifty days after the resurrection. Pentecost was a special Jewish religious holiday. Jews and God fearing gentiles from around the world gathered annually in Jerusalem to celebrate this special day.

The disciples of Jesus also gathered together in one place to celebrate Pentecost. "Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting... divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" and began to speak of Christ in ways that people

from all over the world could understand. The news spread throughout the city, and a great crowd gathered and Peter stood up and spoke. At the end of his sermon three thousand people were added to the church.

That day of Pentecost was the beginning of a new era in the history of the church. Pentecost marks the birthday of the New Testament Church. That original Pentecost can never be repeated, anymore than the death and resurrection of Jesus can be repeated. But there's a sense in which Pentecost happens again whenever the church is empowered by the Spirit to make new beginnings and to grow as people come to know and follow Christ as Lord and Savior.

Are we on the eve of a new beginning here at the Oxford Presbyterian Church? I've been your minister, now, for eight years and four months. I've been here three years longer than Bill Levering, my predecessor. I've been here longer than John Gilmore. I've just surpassed in seniority Glenn Knecht, who was here in the sixties. I've been here longer than Dick Oman, Larry McMaster, ² Doug Davies, ~~Roy Campbell~~, ~~Carl Fisher~~ (42-51) and ~~Doug Davies~~. I've been here longer than any minister since ~~the 1930s~~. There's only ²¹ ~~one~~ minister, who ^{has} ~~has~~ been here longer than I have in the 20th century. - Carl Fisher ~~Roy Campbell~~ }

Not only have I been here longer than most ministers, I've been here longer than I've been in any other church. So I've been asking myself, "Is it time for me to make a new beginning? Is it time for me to re-activate my dossier and seek another call to another church? Or is it time for me begin anew my ministry here?" That's what I'd like to do. I'd like to begin my ministry here anew. I don't want to go anyplace else. I want to stay here. I like you and I like this town. I'd

I like to lead the Oxford Presbyterian Church into a new chapter in its history - a new chapter of spiritual renewal - not just physical rebuilding.

But I'm very much aware of our need for new energy and faith that can come only from the Holy Spirit. We're worn out after five years of recovery from the fire. We've spent so much energy in special committees, congregational meetings, church auction, Apple Festival, Celebrate Renewal Campaign and other special events. We've spent so much energy physically rebuilding.

I sense that our energy is spent. We're tired of giving and being told to give more. We're tired of meetings and committees. We're worn out. I'm worn out. I need renewed energy. This new energy and new faith can't be conjured up by me alone or by all of us together. I'm convinced it must come from God's Spirit. We need to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. And I wonder if the instructions of Jesus to his disciples have application to us with regard to the next stage of rebuilding. "Wait!" Wait - not so much until more money comes in - but wait for the promise of the Father - wait for the Holy Spirit to give us new energy and a new beginning for our church that will lead us to more effective ministry to our own members, many of whom are hurting - and to more effective evangelism to those many people outside the church who are moving to Oxford.

One thing that stands out in the description of what happened on the day of Pentecost. The disciples were all together in one place when the Holy Spirit came upon them. It reminds me of when I was in Boy Scouts trying to start a fire. I discovered that a bunch of burning sticks separated from one another soon burn

out. But if you keep those burning sticks close to one another, the fire keeps burning and grows hotter and hotter.

God has given each of us the Spirit. But as long as we practice a kind of private Christianity, the Spirit ebbs just like the the fire ebbs when the sticks in a camp fire are scattered. But when we come together to worship and praise and pray and hear God's word we give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to enable us to burst into a flame that will set the whole church and town on fire with the knowledge and love of Christ.

We have 500 members on our church membership rolls. About seventy-five of these members live far away - in other cities and towns and are unable to gather with us on a regular basis. They need to be encouraged to become involved in a local church if they can't worship with us. They need to keep the flame of faith alive through meeting with other Christians for worship and service.

About seventy-five members are older people, either shut in or unable to come on their own to worship and study with God's people on a regular basis - we can't forget these people. They too need the warmth and fellowship of the Holy Spirit through the presence of fellow Christians. We need to visit them regular and find ways to include them in the work and worship of the church according to their abilities.

About 150 members have simply become inactive or have never been active. They have confessed their faith in Christ. They believe in Christ's resurrection, just like those early pre-Pentecost Christians believed in the resurrection of

Jesus, but nothing has ever really turned them on about the church - or, perhaps, something has turned them off. They need to be drawn into the fellowship of believers lest the flame of faith entirely burns out.

That leaves us with about 200 members who are active to a greater or lesser extent. These 200 members contribute, probably 80% of the tithes and offerings. These 200 members do most of the work. These 200 are getting pretty tired out after five years of hard work since the fire. What if, with the remaining energy that we have left, we took several months to make every effort to get us all together. What if we began to meet and go over the membership list and pray for all our members, but especially for the inactive members. What if we listed their needs and concerns, some of their possible hurts, and remember some of the ways that formerly served Christ within the church as we prayed for them. The more of us that took part in inviting and talking with and developing waning relationships with some of our inactive members the less work any of us would have to do. We wouldn't all have to meet and pray together. The choir, the Sunday School classes, the Session and the Deacons already meet - what if each existing group within the church took time to remember and pray and seek to find ways to minister more effectively to all our members. Could that not possibly be the beginning of new work of the Holy Spirit among us?

I believe the Holy Spirit led us to build the church that we're building. We're building a church whose sanctuary will seat about 500 people. But our average worship attendance now is about 190 including both services. Could it be

that the Holy Spirit led us to build a sanctuary that size because the Spirit wants us to begin to take more seriously the task of evangelism and church growth. May we wait upon the power of the Spirit - trusting the God we have come to know through Jesus Christ to begin a new chapter in the life of our church.

Let us pray : Lord God of Pentecost, breathe upon our lives your breath as you did upon those early Christians. We hunger and thirst after your righteousness. We want you to take from our lives those things which are wrong. By faith we receive the person of your Holy Spirit. We give the Spirit of Christ control of all that we know of ourselves. Take away the false spirits in our lives. Fill us with the spirit of love and joy and peace. Use us as your witnesses so that many men and women and children may be added to your church to worship and serve you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.