31 May 2020 St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
The Feast of Pentecost Vienna, VA

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"Back to the Future"
Text: Acts 2:1-21 (John 7:37-39; Numbers 11:24-30)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is interesting that on this day when the Apostles receive the Holy Spirit and begin to go OUT into all the world with the Gospel, this is the day when many of you came BACK to the church for the first time in quite some time!

But far from that being ironic or opposites, it's actually *perfect*. Because that's the Holy Spirit's job - to go OUT into all the world through the preaching of the Word, and through that Word to call, *gather*, enlighten, and sanctify the Holy Christian Church (Small Catechism).

So when the Holy Spirit came on that first Christian Pentecost, that's what happened. People from all over the world heard the Apostles ***telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God***. And this was not the result of ***new wine*** and lots of it, so that the Apostles were babbling like drunks! It was ***the day of the Lord***. The day when *the Lord and Giver of life* (Nicene Creed) was working. A ***great and magnificent day***, according to the prophet Joel. That ***everyone who*** hears this Word ***and calls upon the name of the Lord*** be saved. That's what the Holy Spirit, that's what Pentecost, that's what the Church, is all about. And as we hear later in this chapter from Acts, that's what happened, in a great and magnificent *way*, as 3,000 souls were baptized that day (Acts 2:41).

So that many of you were able to come back to the church *today*, on Pentecost - though we wish it could have been on Easter! - is the perfect picture of the Church.

And actually, that word *back* . . . if you wanted to connect a word with the work of the Holy Spirit, that might just be it. I know that's not a word we normally think of with the Holy Spirit . . . words like *sanctify* (to make holy), or *inspire* (as He did for the biblical writers), or *revelation* or *gifts* . . . those are more usual. And they're good. And right. But that word *back* is, too. And pretty important.

For it didn't take long after the Apostles went out for some to claim that the Holy Spirit wasn't about *back* at all, but about forward, about *new.* A claim that has continued and that we still see today. That the Holy Spirit is all about the NEW - new *visions*, new *revelations*, new *truths*. The Holy Spirit is moving the Church forward. The Holy Spirit isn't about the same old tired truths and revelations that we find in the Scriptures - but about new, exciting, and different things! Even if those things contradict what He said before in the Bible. That's

okay! That was then, this is now. And the Holy Spirit is leading the way, blazing a new way.

Except . . . on that first Christian Pentecost, the Holy Spirit did nothing of the sort. Instead of new visions, new revelations, and new truths, the Holy Spirit directed Peter and the others BACK to the OLD - **the Old Testament.** In the verses that we heard today from the book of Acts, and in the ones right after them that we'll hear next week, when Peter and the others stood up to preach, *that's* what they preached! Not that the old was done and God was doing something new - they preached what the old meant, and how it was not only relevant, but was all true, *still* true, and being fulfilled. Fulfilled by Jesus and the sending of the Spirit. **BACK** is what the Spirit is all about.

When I teach the catechism, that's an important part of the teaching - that our faith isn't just a New Testament thing, but has its foundation and roots in the Old Testament. And so when teaching about **Baptism**, we look at the story of Elisha and Naaman. When teaching about **Confession**, we look at the story of David and Nathan. When teaching about the **Lord's Supper**, we look at the story of the Passover. And there's lots more. All these New Testament things are already there in the Old Testament, being foreshadowed, preparing the way, just as John prepared the way for Jesus.

And this is an important point - for the truth doesn't change, revelation doesn't change, because God doesn't change. He *is the same yesterday, today, and forever* (Hebrews 13:8). Which, while some may think is bad news, is actually very good news indeed! For if things keep changing, and the Holy Spirit keeps changing, and what is true keeps changing, then we have a God we really can't count on. A God who may change His promises to us and change His mind about us. And that would be a God . . . well, *like* us!

But that's not a God we want, or need. So what the Holy Spirit does is **move us forward to the new by looking back to the old**. Or think of it this way: **the Christian walks into the future facing backwards**. Which, if you think of it, *is a picture of faith*. Because walking backwards, we can't see where we're going, but we go because of what God has done for us in the past, what He has promised in the past, and His faithfulness in the past. And focused on that, we can move into the future with confidence - not because we know where we're going, but because the Lord knows what *He's* doing. And we can count on Him.

So that's what Peter and the other eleven did on that first Pentecost - they moved into the future looking BACK to what God had promised and what God had done.

And that's how we move into the future still today. Even during these days of pandemic, when *it is said* that the future is so uncertain and unsure. Not for us! Yes, it is uncertain and unsure if you're facing *forward* and trying to see into the future - *who can do that?* But if you're moving into the future facing *backward*, then we can be certain and we can be sure. Not that we know all that's going to happen; of course we don't. But we know who our God is, what He has promised, and what He has done. And we know: so He will be and do in the future.

So we move into the future as the Holy Spirit points us **back to the cross**. We see the love of God for us there, and the lengths He is willing to go for us. We see the atonement for our sins, and so we know they are forgiven and will not condemn us. For as St. Paul said: *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things* (Romans 8:32)? **So looking back to the cross**, we move into the future certain and sure.

And we move into the future as the Holy Spirit points us **back** even further - **to the Old Testament**. We see how God kept his promises, and cared for and provided for His people. Even during times of plague, exile, and discipline, God was faithful. They may not always have understood it, just as we don't. God may not have acted as quickly as they hoped, just as we sometimes think. Maybe His ways were quite the opposite of what they expected. But all of time and history worked toward the fulfillment of the promise God made in the Garden, of a Saviour who was to come. And all of time and history is working toward the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to us, of a Saviour who is coming again. **So looking back to the Old Testament**, we move into the future certain and sure.

And we move into the future as the Holy Spirit points us **back** still further - **to Paradise**. There is no question that though creation is good, and a good gift of God to us, it is not as God made it. We have plunged it into sin. Natural disasters, mutated viruses, man's inhumanity toward man, rioting, all testify to this. But as it was in the beginning, so it will be again. In Christ. And so just as in the beginning there was a new heavens and a new earth, so the Scriptures teach us that *in the end* there will be a new heavens and a new earth. For new you. You made new by the Holy Spirit. You baptized new, you absolved new, you fed new. A newness already begun here and now in you, but not yet complete; not yet fully. That day is still coming. But coming it is . . . **So looking back to Paradise**, we move into the future certain and sure.

It is so tempting, though, to turn back around and charge into the future! That's exactly what satan wants us to do. For then we run blindly. Then we may run ahead of where God is leading us. Then we certainly run toward what *we* want, but uncertain if it's what *God* wants, and so not sure we're on the right path, going the right way, or doing the right thing.

So the Holy Spirit calls us to repent - which, we could say, means **to turn back around**. Turn back to the cross, turn back to the Word, turn back to Christ. For from His side flows all that you need.

That's what we heard in the Holy Gospel today. ***Out of his heart will flow rivers of living waters***. Out of the heart of Jesus will flow rivers of the forgiveness we need, the Spirit we need, and the life we need. Which we know and see by looking **BACK** . . . Looking BACK **to the cross**, where - literally! - blood and water flowed from Jesus' side when He was crucified. Looking BACK **to the Old Testament**, where water flowed from a rock to give all Israel drink in the wilderness - the rock which, St. Paul tells us, *was Christ* (1 Corinthians

10:4). And looking BACK **to the Garden**, where a river flowed out of Eden to water the world (Genesis 2). And now it is ***living water*** that is given to us - the Spirit. A pouring out *begun* this day, and which hasn't stopped.

And looking BACK to the Old Testament again, we see a picture of this with Moses and the elders of Israel. God took *some* of the Spirit that was on Moses and gave it to the seventy elders. It is a foreshadowing of something even greater for us today, as not just *some*, but the *fullness* of the Spirit has been given, and not just to seventy elders, but to the whole Church. Sons, daughters, young men, old men, male servants, female servants. ***You***. To call, *gather*, enlighten, and sanctify, ***you***. To turn you around and point your BACK. That you be certain and sure, looking BACK to move into the future with confidence.

And so we're BACK today, in Church. Not completely back to normal, but getting there. And hopefully more will come BACK in future weeks, believers old and new, as the Spirit continues to gather His Church. The Spirit still baptizing, still absolving, still feeding. Leading us into a future described like this for us in the book of Revelation (22:1-2): *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*

Now, *you* know what all that means because you are looking to the future looking backwards! You know of the water of life, you know of the tree of life, and you know of Paradise, because it's all old - but the old made new in Christ.

That's what the Holy Spirit is all about. That's what Pentecost is all about. That's what the Church is all about. For the world. For you and I to live and to take out into the world. And show others our certainty and confidence, and so our joy. And tell them that it's for them, too. To proclaim: *Back to the Future!* A most glorious future! In Christ.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.