



Spiritual Commencement

Psalm 104:24-34; John 15:26-27; Acts 2:1-21; Eph 1:15-23

Today is a day of celebration. We are celebrating our graduates and their achievements. They have toiled, studied, and completed coursework to arrive at this time of recognition of their efforts and achievements. We pause to celebrate their preparation and beginning a new phase of life. Graduation is not an endpoint. It is a beginning.

As much as we look to graduation as the completion of a series of levels and stages, it is a launching pad—commencement into the new stage of life beyond the one just completed. It is a sign of transition to a new phase of life. It was always hard for me to associate my graduations with beginnings. It seems much more natural to consider the closing of a chapter in life. Yet graduation is that celebration at the threshold—the turning of a page into life beyond the open door.

In the life of the early disciples, today marks a commencement, as well. Pentecost—a Jewish festival day of first fruits fifty days after Passover—was a celebration of God's provision in the spring of the year. The spring crops were beginning to come in, and the people celebrated God's gift of harvest. For the disciples gathered together, it was more than just that. It was the day on which the prophecy of Joel came to fruition as God's Spirit was poured upon the disciples to mark the coming of a new era.

Jesus had recently physically left the disciples after the resurrection, departing to heaven with the promise of the Spirit's coming and a mission of witness to be fulfilled. They had been charged to remain in Jerusalem for this day in which they would be covered in power by the Breath of God. They would then be enabled to bear witness to Jesus. This was their mission—the purpose of their calling. They were to bear witness to Christ Jesus before the nations far and near.

They were hardly prepared for such a grand task. They certainly did not feel prepared. If we read the gospels, they continually point to the disciples misunderstanding Jesus, missing the point of Jesus' words, and simply not making the grade. They asked all the wrong questions and took the wrong initiatives. On the very night of Jesus' betrayal they had failed to understand the necessity of his death. The crucifixion cast them in despair, though Jesus had announced its coming. They had not grasped the message that Jesus would rise from the dead. Then they even failed to accept the news that Jesus was risen and alive! How could these incapable disciples be the ones entrusted with the gospel message? How could God trust them as the witnesses of Christ Jesus—the ones on whom the gospel would depend?

They had spent three years with Jesus. Day in and day out, they had listened to his teaching, watched his ministry, and participated in the tasks assigned to them. It just did not seem to have been enough. All too often, they were left scratching at their heads upon hearing Jesus speak. They were too often befuddled by Jesus' actions—by his dealing so amply in the currency of mercy and grace. So many of the lessons Jesus had been teaching had not yet sunken to the level of habitual practice. They lacked experience. They yearned for a few more classes and time to digest Jesus' teaching.

Regardless, Jesus considered it a good time to launch them into the world of ministry. Regardless of their reservations and doubts, it was time to learn to depend upon God to fill their lack and resource the mission to which they were called. Ready or not, the time had come. It was time to trust God beyond the limits of their vision, comfort, and understanding.

On this day of celebration—the Feast of First Fruits, God was pleased to shower the disciples with the Holy Spirit. As the prophets of old had been gifted occasionally with the Spirit of God, so now Joel’s prophecy of God’s Spirit being poured out upon all the people was coming to fulfillment. With Jesus no longer physically present as Master, teacher, and guide, now God was present in spirit and accessible to them all at the same time. With that presence was the enabling power of God to accomplish God’s will in spite of the disciples’ limitations.

This was the transition and launch to ministry. It was unexpected. They had gathered as had been their habit. They were ready to celebrate the traditional festival. Then God came in and changed things on them. In the midst of their plans and expectations, God empowered them with the Spirit to speak the news of Jesus Christ before Jews in pilgrimage from all over the Roman Empire.

Jesus had never offered a course in world languages. Peter did not even speak Greek, the common language of the civilized world. All he knew was Aramaic and enough Hebrew to pronounce the Torah readings in the Synagogue and participate in the singing of the Psalms. Suddenly, God stepped in to use Peter and the rest of the 120 disciples to share the good news of redemption in the languages of the nations represented.

This was the day Jesus had spoken of: “This gospel will be preached to all the nations, and then the end will come.” He had not referenced the “end of the world,” but the “end times,” the “latter days,” that second section of history when God’s Spirit would be poured out and available to all. It was the start of the era after Messiah’s coming. It was the beginning of the period we live in, as well.

Pentecost seems like so long ago. It seems so remote from our own experience. We do not gather on rooftops. We do not use an upper deck of our homes to preach and proclaim the good news of grace and God’s redemption in Jesus Christ. We no longer feel the urgency to share the message that redemption and reconciliation not simply as possible but as necessary. We no longer feel compelled to take up the mission Jesus left for those 120 believers in Jerusalem. We would just assume someone else take up the call.

Someone with more preparation and training should be responsible to take the gospel of Christ to those who need to hear. Someone who has had more time to digest the gospel on the mount and the news of cross and resurrection is a more likely candidate for the task. We are better off paying someone else to get the job done.

We miss the urgency. We miss our responsibility. We miss the point of Pentecost altogether. This is our commencement. This is our graduation. This is our day to step up from the sidelines and accept that God has breathed his Spirit upon us to enable us as witnesses to bear the good news of Christ Jesus. We are empowered by the Spirit of Christ to take up the mission left for us.

We are filled and empowered for a purpose. We are entrusted with a mission, yet we are not alone. We are all to take up the cause of Christ Jesus, announcing good news to people far and near. We are to bear witness before all nations of peoples that God desires to reconcile the world to fellowship with one another and with God. We may feel unprepared for such a lofty calling. The disciples certainly did. It is in our sense of under preparedness, however, that we can learn to rely on the indwelling of the Spirit of God, poured in us that all might know the good news. Are we ready for this commencement?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*