

## UNMASKED

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Acts 2:1-21

None of us, in our wildest dreams, ever imagined that we that we would spend an entire year putting on masks to cover our mouth and nose every time we went out in public. Of course, none of us were around for the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 when they did the same thing. Even a hundred years ago, they figured out that masks worked.

This year, as a nation, we would have fared much better if we had taken to wearing masks earlier and with greater commitment. Simply put, masks are effective at reducing the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

According to the CDC, this virus is “an infection transmitted predominately by inhalation of respiratory droplets generated when people cough, sneeze, sing, talk, or breathe.” We wear the masks not just to protect ourselves, but to protect those around us. The bottom line is that mask wearing has a clear community benefit in controlling the spread of the virus.

Having said that, I’ve yet to meet anyone who actually enjoys wearing a mask. My personal experience is that masks are hot, they fog up my glasses, and they mess with my peripheral vision. On the plus side, I’ve heard some of you ladies comment that it is nice to run to the store without makeup and just hide under your mask. I am confident that the past year has provided us with an increased appreciation for those who wear masks all the time, people like nurses and doctors.

Humans have been wearing masks since the beginning of time. Adam and Eve wore masks. They just put them in different places. The original masks were probably black soot rubbed on the faces of our earliest ancestors. In fact, the word mask shares its root with the word mascara.

On the church calendar, today is the day of Pentecost. This event is commonly regarded as the birth of the Christian church.

Our reading is from the book of Acts which is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Acts begins with the resurrection of Jesus. Following his resurrection, Jesus then spends time with his disciples teaching them more about the kingdom of God before he ascends into heaven. As he ascends, he instructs his followers to wait together in Jerusalem. So they do.

Pentecost did not originate with the Christian church. It is an ancient Jewish festival that commemorates God’s giving of the 10 Commandments to Moses.

So, according to Acts, on the day of the festival of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus are gathered together in a house in Jerusalem (as Jesus had instructed them) when something happens. It is difficult to explain. There is a loud, chaotic noise. It is like an airplane flying low over your house at the very same time that a freight train is passing by while both your neighbors are mowing their lawns. Our Scripture describes it as being *like the rush of a violent wind*. And by violent, think tornado. This noise fills the house where Jesus' followers are gathered.

Then, in addition to the noise, there are these strange that objects appear in the house among the people. These objects look like flames of fire and they dance among the people. A flame rests on each person there.

We know today that what these people experienced in that room is the outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit. And each person in the room is filled with the Spirit. As John the Baptist foretold about Jesus, *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire* (Luke 3:16). This event is their baptism in the Holy Spirit. One immediate result of their being filled with the Spirit is that each of them is given the ability to speak in a foreign language.

At this time in Israel's history, Pentecost was a widely observed festival. Jews from all over the world convened on Jerusalem to worship and to celebrate. Many had traveled from different lands where they spoke different languages. The turbulent sound emanating from the house where the disciples are gathered attracts attention, and a crowd congregates outside the house. These people are curious about the source of this racket.

As the followers of Jesus pour out into the street, the crowd is confused and astonished because they are able to understand these people even in their own native tongues. Amazed, they ask, *How do we understand these Galileans?* And then we, the reader, are provided that lengthy list of peoples and nations, supposedly representing each group in the crowd: *Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia* and so on.

The people immediately understand that the disciples are speaking about God and telling of God's deeds of power. Some in the crowd, however, denounce the disciples saying that they are not speaking in any language, but they are simply babbling after drinking too much cheap wine.

So, Peter steps forward and takes control of the situation. He addresses the crowd telling them that the disciples are not drunk as they might assume because, for one thing, it is only nine o'clock in the morning. Peter quotes the prophet Joel where Joel foretells of that day when God will pour out God's spirit on all people. On that day there will be prophesying, and dreams, and visions. When that day comes, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Peter then preaches the story of Jesus and how Jesus is part of God's great plan for all. The crowd responds and they ask Peter what they might do. Peter tells them, *Repent, and be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

We are told that 3000 people were baptized that day. And the community of believers grows and the people share their belongings and give to those who are in need. They worship and eat together and give praise to God. The church is born.

The Holy Spirit is powerful. It is what we celebrate on Pentecost. It moves through us, connecting us to God and to one another. It inspires us and pushes us; it guides and directs us in the ways of God. The Holy Spirit is God among us.

In the story of Pentecost, it is interesting to see how the very first thing the followers of Jesus do when filled with the Spirit is to speak in other languages. Maybe that is what the occasion demanded—the ability to witness to all those people from foreign lands, to share with them the story of Jesus and the power of God, to offer them a clear path to salvation.

If you think about it, this is the reverse of the story of Babel. At Babel, God scattered the people by giving them different languages. At Pentecost, God uses language to bring people together.

Today, after a year, we finally are able to relax our COVID protocols and remove our masks. Most of you have been vaccinated and the rate of infection in Wilson County has dropped to just seven cases a day. I read this week that out in California at the San Francisco General Hospital, for the first time in fourteen months, that hospital has zero COVID patients.<sup>1</sup> Here in Tennessee, we've still got a ways to go with vaccinations. Only 38% of our state's population has received at least one dose. Out of 50 states, that puts us at number 45. Please encourage your friends to get their shots. We're not out of the woods yet.

But we are far enough along to remove our masks. And that is good news.

But back to the Pentecost story. For the Jews who came to Jerusalem for Pentecost, there was always a barrier—language. Although the visitors to Jerusalem were Jewish, they didn't necessarily speak Hebrew or Aramaic—the languages of Jerusalem. They came to Israel as pilgrims to worship and hear stories about God—to hear about God's *deeds of power*.

To better understand their dilemma, I want you to imagine something for me. I want you to imagine that you are an American, born in this country, and you speak English. Your father came to America from another country that speaks another language. It could be Poland, or Germany, or Brazil, or China, or anywhere. But

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<sup>1</sup> <https://abc7news.com/sf-general-hospital-has-no-covid-hospitalizations-san-francisco-numbers/10670782/>

let's say it is Italy. Your father came to the U.S. as a young man from Italy. In time, he met your mother, who was, let's say, Irish, and they married and had you. Sadly, your father died when you were young and you never got to know him that well.

As you grow older, you want to know more about your father and his life in the old country. You've heard stories that he had been an amazing young man. You have vague memories of tales of where he was from. So, you travel to Italy, to his home village, where you hope to find cousins and aunts and uncles and friends who can tell you more about your father.

You find them, but you don't speak Italian and they don't speak English. You hire an interpreter, but too much gets lost in translation. You are never able to compose a full picture of your father as you had hoped.

That is the situation at Pentecost. Believers flocked to Jerusalem to worship God, but the language barrier prevented them from participating fully. They knew what was going on, but there was this barrier to their understanding.

Our masks have been a barrier for us, haven't they? Another downside of these cloth masks is that they muffle our speech. They make communicating more difficult. But one of the miracles of Pentecost is that barriers are torn away, and the followers of Jesus pour out into the streets clearly speaking the languages of all people. Everyone present is able to hear and fully understand the stories of God and God's deeds of power which includes sending Jesus Christ to be with us. That is the glory of Pentecost—that the Holy Spirit opens the path to God. As we read at the beginning of the gospels, John the Baptist preaches to the people: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God* (Luke 3:4).

Today marks a new chapter for our congregation. The masks are off, the past year is behind us, our doors are open. Let us embrace this moment. Let us embrace the Spirit. Let us rise to the words of the prophet Joel: may we prophesy, may we see visions, may we dream dreams. Take this moment and imagine what we can do to bring the full glory of God to our community.

Let us rush out into the street telling the world of God's deeds of power. Let us be the church.