

Failure to Launch Is Not an Option
Acts 2:1-21 (Pentecost Sunday)
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Picture a rocket on a launch pad. A clear blue sky. The white shell of the spacecraft, gleaming in the sun. Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... blast-off! It is a thrilling moment. Except when the rocket experiences a failure to launch.

Exactly 21 years ago, on June 4, 1996, a cluster of four spacecraft were launched on the maiden flight of a rocket called Ariane 5. Unfortunately, the rocket flew off course just 37 seconds after launch. Disintegration began, and then its flight termination system caused it to self-destruct in a deafening boom. When the rocket failed to achieve orbit, the four spacecraft were lost. Fortunately, no people were on board.

The problem? An error in the software design. It became one of the most expensive software bugs in history, resulting in a loss of more than \$370 million. But since that time, the Ariane 5 has become one of the most reliable of rockets, logging more than 90 flights.

On the day of Pentecost, the apostles were all together in Jerusalem. The word "apostle" means "messenger" or "one who is sent forth." Waiting in the city as Jesus had instructed them to do, the apostles were on the launch pad, ready to be sent forth.

Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ...

"Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind" (v. 2). The sound filled the house where the disciples were sitting, not unlike the firing of the main engine of an Ariane rocket.

"Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them" (v. 3). Perhaps these tongues looked something like the fire that comes out of the two solid rocket boosters that ignite just a few seconds after the main engine of the Ariane.

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4). The apostles began to lift off,

causing awe and astonishment among the people gathered in Jerusalem. This international crowd heard the apostles using a variety of languages, "speaking about God's deeds of power" (v. 11). But not everyone was impressed -- some sneered and said that the apostles were drunk (v. 13).

Then Peter took a bold stand in front of the crowd and told them that the coming of the Spirit was a fulfillment of ancient prophecy. The launch of the Christian church was the beginning of a new era, one in which "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 21). Blast-off!

On the day of Pentecost, the Christian church experienced a successful launch. It escaped the gravitational pull of a skeptical crowd and achieved an orbit that it continues to inhabit today. But we each have a role to play in keeping the church from crashing and burning.

Successful rocket launches are thrilling, but perhaps you're aware that there is also a phenomenon called "failure to launch syndrome" that has nothing to do with rockets. Instead, this problem has been observed among young adults who cannot leave the parental nest. According to one website in Tucson, Arizona, "it is characterized by low levels of motivation, poor work ethic, lack of vision for the future, inability or unwillingness to take responsibility when appropriate and an inability to manage daily household chores." Maybe you saw the movie *Failure to Launch*, in which Matthew McConaughey played a 35-year-old who had no interest in leaving his parents' comfortable home.

The Christian church also faces its own "failure to launch syndrome." That is not to say that the church did not launch at Pentecost. It did. The power of the Holy Spirit was present. There was a full, complete countdown and lift off.

But sometimes, the local expression of the church universal has problems getting off the launch pad and it's something all churches need to be vigilant about. But, why? Why is failure to launch a concern?

Just like a rocket that misfires, failure to launch happens in the church when Christians are not adequately fueled, properly programmed and set on the right course. Only when all three are in place can the church complete its mission. So let's do a countdown:

Three: Christians need to be adequately fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture tells us that the apostles blasted off successfully in Jerusalem because "all

of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 4). The truth is that without the power and inspiration of the Spirit, we're never going to get off the ground.

So where can we get this high-octane, highly volatile spiritual fill-up? It starts in worship. We can pray for the Holy Spirit to help us hear God's Word. We can ask for the Spirit to heal us, touch us and transform us. We can trust the Spirit to make Christ present to us in the bread and cup of Communion. Worship is not a human activity; instead, it is an activity that is both human *and* divine, with Jesus present to us right here, right now through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes, we need to get out of our comfort zones to experience the power of the Spirit. That's why there's not one right way to worship. For some of us, we were raised in traditions that emphasized quiet reverence as the proper way to show our love and respect for God. For others of us, we come from traditions where worship is loud and full of movement. It's *all* worship and it *all* has the power to open us to the presence and activity of God. It's where our spiritual fueling begins.

Two: Christians need to be properly programmed, especially programmed to connect with our neighbors. No bugs in the system. On the day of Pentecost, the apostles "began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4). These uneducated Galileans did not expect the international crowd in Jerusalem to learn Aramaic, the language that each of them had grown up speaking. Instead, they met them where they were, using the diverse languages given to them by the Spirit to speak to the people around them "about God's deeds of power" (v. 11).

We, too, can program ourselves to make connections, learning new languages and new communication tools to reach our neighbors. Richard Lindsay, the co-editor of PopTheology.com, says that we need to make use of creative multimedia, "popular culture that people interact with every day, as well as music and art generated by congregation members or local artists." We need to communicate messages that help people see "why Jesus is important and has relevance to their lives." Everything we do should be programmed to make these kinds of connections, according to Lindsay. Churches that lose the ability to communicate effectively soon find themselves losing altitude and eventually falling out of orbit.

One: Inspired by the Spirit and programmed to make connections, ***we can embark on a mission of sharing good news with people around us.*** In Jerusalem, Peter stood up and promised that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be

saved" (v. 21). He gave his hearers a message of inclusion and hope. While we may not join Peter in preaching on street corners, we can follow his lead by building relationships based on authentic concern. All of us have natural spheres of influence, and there are needs and people hungry for hope and friendship in every one of those places. Many of us are reluctant to reach out to our friends and neighbors, fearing their judgment or rejection. But the truth is that a lot of people today are feeling isolated and alone, and there are more opportunities than we realize to meet people where they are.

Often these kinds of connections don't start out as overtly religious. We can first look for opportunities to serve our neighbors, whether it's taking them food when someone is ill or helping out with a chore that's difficult for them to do on their own. We can also invite a neighbor or friend to participate in Be the Kingdom Sunday where they can join others in serving their community. We have gained a number of tutors for Eagles Wings because a Calvary member told a friend about the program and that led to someone's participation, even if they never attend church here. Cooking Around the World offers a similar opportunity this fall, if you know someone who loves being in the kitchen and would enjoy sharing that passion with a student.

We tend to shy away from the "E" word in church: evangelism. But, that's more because we misunderstand it, I think, than because we aren't equipped or able to share our faith. Just start by connecting with others, serving them, and loving them in whatever place they're in. And, look for opportunities to share how your faith has helped you in difficult times of your own. Those opportunities will come, if we'll just watch for them.

The Pentecost countdown includes being fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit, being programmed to connect with neighbors, and having a mission to bring good news to the world. Three, two, one ... blast-off! These qualities were in place when the church first launched, and they will keep us flying on the right course today. For Pentecost and the power of the Holy Spirit, we give thanks and praise. Amen.