

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! A thrilling moment. Except when the rocket experiences a failure to launch.

This week as weather prevented Nasa and SpaceX, from sending 2 American Astronauts into Space, we may be tempted to think about other launch failures. For instance, did you know that almost 24 years ago, on June 4, 1996, a cluster of four spacecraft were launched on the maiden flight of a rocket called the 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. Ka-boom! The four spacecraft were lost -- but thankfully, no people were aboard when the rocket failed to achieve orbit.

The problem? An error in it's software design. It became one of the most expensive software bugs in history, resulting in a loss of more than \$370 million dollars. Since that time, the Ariane 5 has become one of the most reliable of rockets, with more than 102 successful flights.

Today, however, we consider a different kind of launch! On the day of Pentecost, the apostles of Jesus were all together in the city of Jerusalem. The word "apostle," as you may already know, means "messenger" or "one who is sent forth." The apostles were on a launch pad so to speak, ready to be sent forth. Five ... four ... three ... two ... one" Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind." The sound filled the house where they were sitting, like the firing of the main engine of a rocket. "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." Perhaps these tongues looked 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." The apostles began to lift off, causing amazement and astonishment among the people gathered in Jerusalem. In fact, this miraculous event caused such a ruckus that the international crowd gathered in the city that day actually heard the apostles using a variety of languages, "speaking about God's deeds of power." But not everyone was impressed -- some sneered and said that the apostles were "filled with new wine."

Then the apostle 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." 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. And whether we are aware of it or not, we each have a role to play in keeping the church from crashing and burning.

Have you heard of the "failure to launch syndrome"? Rockets are not involved in the condition at all. Instead, it is a problem that is quite common among young adults who cannot leave the parental nest. According to studies done by credible Psychologists, 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." This theme was featured several years ago in a movie called *Failure to Launch*, featuring Matthew McConaughey as a 35 year old man who had no interest in leaving his parent's comfortable home.

Similarly the Christian church also faces its own "failure to launch syndrome." Now...please note that I'm not suggesting that the church failed to launch at Pentecost. It did!

The power of the Holy Spirit was present. There was a full, complete countdown, and launch that day. But rather I am suggesting that sometimes, the local expression of the church universal has problems getting off the launch pad.

So why is that? It happens when Christians are not adequately fueled, when they aren't properly programmed, and when they are not 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. The Bible tells us that the apostles blasted off successfully in Jerusalem because "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit." Without the 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? Through worship, for starters... 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 wine we receive during Communion. Worship is not a human activity; instead, it is an activity that is both human and divine, with Jesus tangibly present through the power of God's word and the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes, we need to get out of our comfort zones to experience the power of the Spirit. At Calvary Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, a group of African Christians participate in worship on Sunday by bringing offerings forward with a song and a swirling dance, accompanied by drums, a synthesizer and electric guitars. It is a worship experience very different from ones involving traditional hymns, an organ, and a piano. One church member reflecting on the service said that he had "never felt the presence of the Spirit so strongly." More often than as followers of Christ our Spiritual fueling begins with worship, be it traditional, or non-traditional.

Two: Christians need to be properly programmed to connect with their neighbors, *without any* software bugs or programming glitches in the system. On the day of Pentecost, the apostles "began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." Those backwoods Galileans (as viewed by the crowd of spectators that day) did not expect the visitors and tourists in Jerusalem to learn Aramaic, the language that each of them had grown up speaking. Instead, they used the diverse languages given to them by the Spirit to speak to the people around them "about God's deeds of power."

In other words, it should be possible for us to program ourselves to make connections, by learning new languages, and new communication tools to reach out to our neighbors. Richard Lindsay, the co-editor of an online publication called PopTheology, says that we need to make use of creative multimedia, "actual popular culture that people interact with every day, as well as music and art generated by congregation members or local artists."

In addition, he recommends ditching 20-minute, uninterrupted, un-illustrated sermons, along with worship traditions that don't reflect how anyone really communicates these days. In their place, he calls for messages that help people to see "why Jesus is important and has relevance to their lives." Perhaps we need to take some time to brainstorm and think about the kinds of gifts or talents we might have, or need to be programmed with, so we can make connections.

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

While we may not join Peter by preaching on street corners, we can follow his lead by building relationships with our neighbors based on authentic concern. These days that might be a little difficult for us to do, but we can find creative ways to do this by: picking up our phones, sharing a meaningful Facebook post, sending out thinking of you cards, composing a thoughtful email, making facemasks and wearing them to keep ourselves and others safe.

Of course many of us may be reluctant to reach out to our neighbors, fearing their judgment or rejection. But the truth is that many people today are feeling isolated and alone, and might welcome some kind of connection that is honest and respectful.

On Pentecost we remember that the work of the Holy Spirit is to set loose the People of God on the world to witness to the good news. We aren't meant to merely hum our hymns or sing them under our breath. The resounding strains of Christian praise are meant to echo off the walls of cities and towns large and small, all across the globe. "The church exists for mission," theologian Emil Brunner famously remarked, "as a fire exists for burning."

Today as we celebrate the birthday of the Christian church let us remember that the Pentecost countdown includes the fuel of the Holy Spirit, a program to connect with our neighbors, and a mission to bring the Gospel, the good news of God, to the world. Three, two, one ... blast-off! These qualities were in place back when the church first launched, and they will keep us flying on the right course today with the guidance and help of God's Gracious and Powerful Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.