Writing in the magazine First Things the novelist and poet Paul Kingsnorth said this in regards to the idea of limitations: “I realized that a crisis of limits is a crisis of culture, and a crisis of culture is a crisis of spirit.” What he meant by this was that our present culture is predicated on the belief that we are unlimited creatures and can do whatever we want and that this belief leads to a spiritual crisis. He goes on to say that part of the role of religion in general and Christianity specifically is to say that there are limits – limits to what we can and what we should do. Or if you would prefer it all in the words of Harry Callahan in Magnum Force, “A man’s got to know his limitations.”

Today is Pentecost Sunday, which is also known as the birthday of the church. This birthday moniker comes from the fact that Pentecost is day when God gave the Disciples the ability to go beyond their limitations. To go from being a bunch of guys sitting around to being a bunch of guys rushing into the streets spreading the Gospel message. Or if you would like it in the words of Acts, “When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” And while the ability to speak in different languages is a definite gift from God it seems that even the ability to tell people the Gospel message, regardless of language, is something that had been beyond the Disciple’s ability. We as humans can only do so much and to move beyond those limits God has to do something in us and through us.

There is a theological concept which is know as prevenient grace. It is basically what it says it is. Prevenient meaning that which comes before. Or put another way what prevenient grace means is that God is the first one to move. If you look at our Old Testament lesson today we have a good example of this in the valley of the dry bones wherein God asks, “Mortal, can these bones live?” and then answers his own question saying, “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” The bones had limits. On their own they were just bones but through the power of God they could be made alive. God had to do something before the bones could live and similarly God had to do something before the Disciples could go and tell all the world. And while I know this may sound pretty obvious, knowing it and living into it puts us not only in a right relationship with God but with the world. Prevenient grace allows us to move beyond our limitations but only after God first moves. Our problem is that we don’t like to wait for God to first move. We like to be the one who moves first.

There is an old joke about the English which says that they consider themselves a self-made people, - thus relieving the Almighty of a terrible responsibility. And while as a Scot I am always happy to make fun of the English I think much of our understanding of who we are is predicated on the belief that we are self-made. And part and parcel of believing that we are self-made is believing that there are no limits to what we can achieve if we just put our minds to it. There is something in humanity that wants to, in the words of Fleetwood Mac, go our own way. And this instinct goes back to the beginning. In Genesis chapter 3 when the serpent tempts Eve he does so by telling her that by eating the fruit she will go beyond her present limitations and that her, “eyes will be opened, and [she] will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The serpent tempts Eve by telling her that he can do something for her that will move her beyond her present limitations.

So why don’t we like to accept our limitations? Why do we believe that we can and should be able to do whatever it is that we want? And why is it not a good idea? The answer to all of these is sin because this is church after all. But sin is, in so many words, thinking that we have a better idea than God. And the problem with thinking we have a better idea than God is that despite what the Methodists might tell us about using grape juice at communion there is no better ideas. So, anything we do that is different from God’s will is going to be inferior at best and evil at worst. The old advice that about getting lost in the woods works for our faith journey as well. If you don’t remember the advice, it is that if you get lost in the woods and do not have a compass you should stay put, because the more you try to fix your situation the harder you are going to make it for someone to find you. That is something what it is like when we don’t accept our limitations. We go rushing out in our own direction but make it harder and harder for God to come and rescue us.

I am currently reading a book called Time of the Magicians which concerns itself with the 20th century German philosophers Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Cassirer and Heidegger – it is just as exciting as it sounds. Two of them, Benjamin and Cassirer were Jewish, Wittgenstein was somewhat Christian or at least did not reject Christianity and the fourth, Heidegger was an atheist. G.K. Chesterton once said, “Wherever the people do not believe in something beyond the world, they will worship the world. But above all, they will worship the strongest thing in the world.” So, it would probably not surprise Chesterton that the one atheist of this group, Heidegger, became an enthusiastic Nazi. Now I am not saying that every atheist becomes a Nazi some go and make lousy Batman movies like George Clooney. But the fact is when we seek something beyond our limitations it turns into corruption because that is all it can be. We are like the guy at the bar who, despite having had too much to drink, is convinced that he is in good shape to drive home.

Today is Pentecost the day when the Holy Spirit arrives and empowers the Disciples to go out into the world. But remember how it worked. The Disciples did not call a meeting after the Ascension and form a study committee to develop the great ideas they had about how to get the Gospel message out. No instead they waited. They accepted the limitations that Jesus had put on them when he said, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samar′ia and to the end of the earth.” God needed to move before they could move.

Today shows that God does and will give us power to move beyond our limitations but that it will be done in His time. The Disciples by waiting on God were able to begin something that would eventually conquer not just the Roman Empire but be found in every part of the world. Later in the book of Acts the Pharisee Gama′li-el says of the Disciples, “if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.” Our plans fail, but God’s plans endure so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.