

Basics of the Faith: Pentecost
Acts 2:1-21
May 31, 2020

This is Pentecost Sunday, one of the important days in our church year. Pentecost represents the opening ceremony of the church. And so today we celebrate the birthday of the church. It has all the hallmarks of a Hollywood gala: thousands of people, pyrotechnics, amazing displays of the supernatural, and people transfixed by what they heard. Wind and fire, symbols of the Spirit's descent into the little room of Jesus followers, transforms them into a community of faith and action.

Up until now it must have been difficult for the disciples to keep their heads together after all that had happened: the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; the crowds singing Jesus praises; then the trial, the cross, and death, followed by the extraordinary news that Jesus had risen from the dead. His appearance to groups of them over a period of a month, and then his disappearance at the ascension. But on this morning God's power shattered all their expectations.

Luke tells us it was a sound like the rush of a violent wind. This is no gentle inbreaking. The spirit comes suddenly, even violently upon the gathered. Fiery tongues appear and settle on each of them. Then they begin to speak in "other tongues" as enabled by the spirit. In Luke's telling, Pentecost engenders fear and bewilderment rather than celebration. Pentecost births the final age of the world. The Holy Spirit proves not to be a quiet, heavenly dove, but rather a violent force that blows the church into being

After 2000 years we have tended to domesticate this event to the point where experience it only a lovely summer breeze, not a violent wind. As one commentator says: *English translations also underplay the fear-inducing, adrenalin-pumping, wind-tossed, fire-singed, smoke-filled turmoil of that experience. Those who observed this Pentecost visitation from outside the room are described in the NRSV as "bewildered" (v. 6), "amazed and astonished" (v. 7) ... as confused, in an uproar, beside themselves, undone, blown away, thoroughly disoriented, completely uncomprehending.*

We need to be reminded that this wind of Pentecost is the same Spirit who moved over the abyss in Genesis one, who drove back the flood for Noah, who separated the sea for Israel to cross to safety, and who worked through Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the prophets.

All their confusion, uncertainty and doubts were swallowed up by the wind and fire of the Spirit. No doubt! But my guess is that this day also birthed a whole lot of confusion, uncertainty and fear. What does it all mean, and especially for us today?

The Spirit had always been around. Individuals had received his power: The Spirit came upon Saul; it came upon David, the prophets were inspired and led by her, and, of course, Jesus himself, received the Spirit when he emerged from the waters of baptism. Up till this day of Pentecost, the Spirit's life force seems to have been restricted to individuals. But suddenly, at Pentecost, she whooshes down and turns the room full of men and women into united nations translators. The Spirit makes it possible for them to speak in the language of Mesopotamia and Palestine, Asia Minor and Egypt, Rome and Crete and Arabia. There are echoes in this story of the Tower of Babel. Babel had caused division and confusion. But here at Pentecost Babel is reversed.

Up to this moment they had waited, a large group of them that we are told numbered 120. There may have been some coming and going but basically, they stayed hidden, locked away in that room. No doubt they were praying; perhaps reflecting on all that had happened over the past month since the devastation they had felt after Golgotha. As Danielle Shroyer says: *Whatever the disciples were expecting when Jesus told them the Spirit was coming, you can bet they were not expecting what they got: divided tongues of fire, rapid onset foreign language fluency, chaos on the streets of Jerusalem that apparently looked something like a drunken party in the middle of the day.*

What do we expect from this Spirit? I suspect we don't expect this fire and wind in our lives and worship services. We are Presbyterians and are more than a little unsettled by any emotional exuberance in our worship. Indeed, we have gone so far as to say that the gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, died with the written New Testament. I personally have never desired this gift of tongues, but I

am open to the reality of the Spirit's presence in those places where it happens. Hopefully we all are! There are times in the life of a Christian or a church when we feel dried up and spiritually bankrupt. Those are the times when we desperately need the Spirit.

I don't know if you have ever felt such an absence in your life, but perhaps you have experienced echoes of it, some vague sense of something missing in your heart. I can think of three occasions when the Spirit met me in my emptiness.

I remember well the **first** time I went through the experience of a long hiatus from the institution. I drifted slowly away from church as a young man in my 20's. Before I knew it, my bible became a closed book, my attendance at worship became a distant memory, and my life followed the prescribed pattern of a modern, urban Canadian. In a short span of time I was totally divorced from the spiritual life and any of the supports that would nourish it. I now know that as a Christian my spiritual life simply can't survive without the church community. Without the Spirit's presence I don't know where I would landed.

The **second** time was when I was in Japan a few years ago I had this sense of God's absence from the heart of life and it reached into my soul in a powerful way. Moving around in a society where the symbols of Christ's presence at the heart of life are so noticeably absent can be a spiritually draining experience.

Third, about 30 or so years ago I went through a huge crisis in my life. Divorce is one of those life-changing, and devastating moments in a person's life. It would have been easy to drift away from faith in that crisis. Instead, it was the church community and the Spirit's gracious presence that saved my life and helped me toward healing. Without the Spirit during those times of spiritual dryness, I'm not sure how or where my life would have gone. I remember sitting through worship services silently weeping for no apparent reason. I believe now that we the healing of the Spirit.

One of the stand out images of the Spirit's power is found in Ezekiel's vision of Israel in the grave. She has been torn from her homeland, from her temple, from her city, and from her God. The Lord took the prophet in a vision to a valley that was full of bones, very dry bones.

The Lord asks if these bones could live again. I suppose so, the prophet replies. So God asks Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, telling them that God is about to cause breath to enter them. With breath and flesh God will awaken them to life again. Then they will know who is God. So the prophet does as asked and suddenly there was a rattling noise as the bones came together. The bones assumed flesh and looked almost alive, but there still wasn't any breath in them. So God told him to speak a word of prophecy and say to them: *Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.* And they stood up and lived, a great multitude. This is a picture, God tells Ezekiel, of what God will do to Israel who are dead spiritually by giving them life again. God says: *I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.* This is the work of the Spirit; she is the bringer of life.

Jesus also made it clear that the Spirit was essential to our faith in Jesus' salvation. He said to Nicodemus in John chapter three that the wind blows freely and you can hear it but don't know where it comes from. So it is with the Spirit, he says. He is telling Nicodemus that when a person is born from above by the Spirit it is a miracle. In order for a person to be brought into relationship with God, Jesus is saying, they need to be made alive by the Spirit. Paul puts it this way: *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! (2Cor 5:17)*

So obviously Pentecost is critical for the life of individuals and for the life of the church. Without her living, breathing presence we remain powerless and moribund. On your own, Jesus reminded his followers, you are not equipped to do God's work. Jesus was quite clear about this; he said: *without me you can do nothing.* We are not equipped to be who God wants us to be, either as individuals or as community, without the Spirit. God is moving the world toward the new creation and we are the prophetic witnesses of this shift toward the new world God is preparing. Pentecost makes this possible for us. Without Pentecost, without the Spirit of life-giving power, we would just be a community who relay a story from the past. With her we are enabled to live out the story in our lives and in our communities of faith.

What I'm trying to get across here is that the message of Pentecost is that we dare not box in the Spirit. We need to allow her the freedom

within our lives, within our worship, within our fellowship and within our service to others. We need to allow her to rule and guide and energize us. Truth is that we have no idea what the Spirit will do next. It is out of our control. Let's not limit her to our ways of thinking and action. What we know for sure is that the Spirit is bringing about the new world order God intends. The Spirit through the church is bringing about the kingdom on earth. Wouldn't it be exciting to work in harmony with the Spirit in West Flamboro Presbyterian or whatever community of faith you belong to? She seeks to open hearts and bring men, women and children into a saving relationship with Jesus?

Peter ends his Pentecost sermon with an invitation. He tells the crowd that repentance and forgiveness are the gifts God offers to those who call upon him. Peter asks them to repent and be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For, Peter says, the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are throughout the world.

This invitation is for each one of us today. The Spirit is promised and enables us to engage in the mission God has called us to do in our communities. We are the witnesses of God's new age, an age that began with the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost. What an amazing gift this is to us. God dwells in us by his Spirit, comforting, guiding, giving wisdom, and energizing us for mission. May it be true for you and me today.

Amen