

Today is Pentecost, that much should be quite obvious by now. We heard the story of Pentecost from the book of Acts, we are singing songs from the “Pentecost” section of our hymnal, the bulletin cover has Pentecost artwork, our banner and the paraments are red, etc., etc. But does anyone know what this celebration was about *before* it became a Christian Holy Day? It was known as the Feast of Weeks and it fell fifty days after Passover. With the number seven being the holiest number in Jewish tradition, this festival is held on the day after seven weeks of seven days each. It is a holy day, indeed. This festival was not only a celebration of the spring barley harvest but the traditional belief is that this was the day on which Moses received the law, or the Torah. In other words, for a really, really long time, this has been a day to celebrate and recall the powerful, the gracious, and the life-giving presence of God.

So there’s a great deal of excitement in the air in Jerusalem for this celebratory festival day. When the highly anticipated day arrives, we are told that “they” were all together in one place. “They” would be those who had become believers in Christ — according to Acts 1:15, they only numbered about 120 persons. Now of course as we heard last week, ten days prior to this festival, Jesus had promised them that they were going to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. It was an amazing promise, to be sure, but it was a bit short on details. Who all was destined to receive the Holy Spirit? Where, when, and how was this going to take place, exactly?

So while they may have been ready for something, were they ready for *this*? Because suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and just as quickly, divided tongues, as of fire, appeared and rested on each of them. Ready or not, it must have been incredible! For these disciples to experience a dramatic theophany similar to how God had appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush? I imagine them thinking, “No way!”

But every time we might feel or think ‘No Way’ God keeps on making a way. Just a couple of months prior to this, they had all fled and left Jesus to face his suffering and

death alone. The Romans had crucified their beloved teacher on one of their many crosses in part because of Jesus' bold speech. While Jesus had said that he was the Way, and the Truth, and the Life, the Romans wanted to send a message loudly and clearly, "No Way." Crucifixions served as a strong deterrent to anyone and everyone who might feel bold and rebellious against Rome and the status quo. But when hope had seemed lost and violence and death had appeared to have won the day, God made a way — by raising Jesus from the dead. And if anyone among them still had lingering doubts about God's power, suddenly, these strange tongues of fire demonstrate that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. In this instance, the Spirit's power meant they were given the ability to speak in other languages.

Of course, with it being the Feast of Weeks, a.k.a. Pentecost, "there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem." That phrase, "from every nation under heaven" and the list of people from those various nations that follows may seem like something from a far away place and time. But it doesn't need to. Less than an hour away, in my hometown of Saint Paul, there are students whose families speak 140 different languages in their homes. That said, can you imagine the surprise if all of those various families were to gather and a bunch of not-so-highly-educated Galileans like ourselves began to tell them the story of God's deeds of power? You can be sure that this was an amazing and perplexing situation. It led people to ask that all-important question, "What does this mean?"

Well, just pause a moment to think about that small band of people that believed in Jesus. There they were with few resources yet they had been given a big promise. And, just as they lacked a specific strategic plan and yet were called to act boldly in a culture that was likely to reject its message, so too are we called today. So with at least some similarities to these early followers of Jesus, let's see what we might learn from their experience.

First of all, professor Audrey West states, “God’s Spirit is not ours to control.” Sounds a bit obvious, right? But though it’s kind of a “duh” statement, we often fail to act in ways that demonstrate this belief. Some Christians seem to think that they can call on the Spirit to do their bidding rather than the other way ‘round. But the Spirit is not restricted by our human will or desire. We cannot drive it or stop its force anymore than we can control a hurricane’s squall or a tornado’s path. The Spirit blows where it wills and it appears in any number of forms. In the Bible, it appears as a dove at Jesus’ baptism and today, as these divided tongues of fire. The Spirit appears as the breath of God at creation and it is this same breath that animates us. It can appear as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And like that burning pillar that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness, the Spirit continues to guide us, taking us places that we cannot imagine and giving us confidence to speak about God’s deeds of power. Clearly, the Spirit of God is not ours to control.

Secondly, Professor West makes the rather disconcerting yet understandable follow-up statement, “God’s Spirit is active where we least expect it.” When people from all these various nations woke up on that festival day of Pentecost, I highly doubt any of them thought, “I have this funny feeling that I am going to be hearing of God’s deeds of power in my own language from some uneducated Galileans.” So, when it did happen we hear how this experience leaves people feeling bewildered, amazed, astonished, and perplexed. Some observers even sneer about it, accusing the speakers of being drunk. But we cannot allow the most cynical people or those who only know how to critique to limit us. The truth is that God’s Spirit continues to be poured out on all sorts of people — sons and daughters, old and young, those who are free as well as those enslaved, the wealthy and the poor, those who are gay and straight, those who are Christian and those who are not. In terms of God’s Spirit, “When you least expect it, expect it.”

A third learning we can glean from today's story is this, "God's Spirit empowers proclamation." The purpose of any and all gifts of the Spirit is not to edify the one whom the Spirit empowers but so that God will be praised. This again may seem obvious but oh, how often have we seen people use their gifts for their own self-edification or self-glorification. But as Peter quotes from the prophet Joel, the pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh is so that they shall prophesy before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. And what is the reason for this? So that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." It is tremendously exciting to proclaim what God has done and what God is continuing to do in the lives of God's people.

Finally, our fourth learning in terms of "What does this mean?" is that "God's Spirit is poured out for the sake of the world." Our meeting "all together in one place" in worship is meant to help us celebrate the sure promise that God's Spirit continues to bring people together. Sometimes the power of the Spirit blows and it is gentle and soft like a breeze; my guess is most of us like that kind of encounter with the Spirit. Yet other times the Spirit blows like the rush of a violent wind causing chaos and the real, hard stuff of life to come crashing together. But guess what? That too can quite often be the work of the Spirit of God. One way you can tell is if what is going on drives people into God's mission in places and among people that you do not expect. Like those early disciples, we me feel that we are few in number with limited resources. Yet even so, we have been called together to tell others of the powerful, gracious, life-giving presence of God. Are you and I ready and willing to trust in the blowing, swirling, burning, life-giving power of the Spirit that is stirring up a new thing in our midst? Because to do so is to live an Easter faith and a Pentecost faith — God is still very much at work among us, in our homes and workplaces, in our schools and on our streets, for wherever we least expect it, expect it. Amen

Pentecost May 23, 2021

Acts 2:1-21

Pastor Jonathan Zielske