

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2010

Acts 2:1-21

The day of Pentecost may have offered the disciples and Jesus' other followers a bit of a break in the routines they had begun to develop following Christ's ascension into heaven. Waiting and anticipating something—even a good something—when we don't know when it will occur or precisely what we are waiting for—can be stressful and challenging. And so, the traditional holiday of Pentecost, a time to celebrate the harvest, would probably have brought a welcome sense of relief.

They all gathered to celebrate—the eleven remaining disciples, a group of women who had traveled with them supporting Jesus ministry, including Mary Jesus' mother, and a number of other followers and believers. And just at the time when they might have stopped thinking about exactly when the Holy Spirit might be arriving and what form that might take---just when they allowed themselves to be distracted by the rhythm of the familiar calendar—that is when they were surprised, once again, by God!

What happened was quite different than anything they had experienced before, and all thoughts of the harvest festivities left their minds as each of their senses was captured and captivated by the power of the Spirit.

The first thing was the sound of wind. Not that of a soft spring breeze, but a loud rushing noise, the kind of sound like we might expect to accompany a tornado or a hurricane. The sound seemed to emanate from above, and it filled the whole house. Every one of them heard the sound, and probably looked around them to see what its cause might be, or what effects it might have on their surroundings.

As they glanced around, not yet understanding what was taking place, Jesus' followers noticed flame-like visions in their midst, and saw that each one of them had one of these tongues of fire resting upon them. Reminiscent of the burning bush where Moses encountered God, these flames did not consume, they just flickered red...yellow....orange with a lively light.

Even as their minds were occupied with the surprising sounds and sights that had appeared in their midst, there was an added sense of being filled—with joy and with peace and with power and with faith. The Holy Spirit had come, as promised, and filled each of Jesus' followers. The first manifestation of the Spirit's presence within them was that the gathered believers began to speak aloud in a variety of languages.

Between the sounds of rushing wind and voices calling out in different languages, people in the area of that house were drawn by the Spirit and began to gather. 2

This took place in Jerusalem, which was a big city, the City of David where the temple stood. And so, there were devout Jews from every nation living there. As they were drawn by the unusual sounds and the cacophony of voices spilling from the open places of that house, these folks were astonished to recognize their own languages being spoken! They knew that the disciples and many of Jesus' other followers were from Galilee—how was it possible, they wondered, for them to be speaking in such diverse languages—and so fluently that they were easily understood by natives? They clearly heard Jesus' followers speaking about God's power, and wondered what sort of miracle was taking place.

Yet there were others present who couldn't or wouldn't recognize the sacred aspects of the moment, who didn't realize that this was holy ground. It was these disbelievers who sneered, "They are filled with new wine."

In case we, as witnesses to these events through story and scripture, are not sufficiently convinced of the Holy Spirit's presence by the sound of wind, the sight of the tongues of fire, or the Galilean fishermen speaking in a variety of foreign languages, it is still likely that we will be convinced by what happened next....

Peter, impulsive, bumbling Peter, who was known for eagerly trying to do the right thing, but usually getting things rather confused, stood and addressed the crowd with authority and wisdom great poise.

Could this really be Peter, the fisherman from Galilee, standing before this gathering crowd in the middle of Jerusalem, explaining that indeed Jesus' followers were not drunk, but that they were filled with Holy Spirit, quoting the prophet Joel, and serving as a witness to God's power as manifested in the Risen Christ? Yes, indeed this was Peter—brother of Andrew, once known as Simon, renamed Peter 'the Rock' by Jesus.

This time Peter got everything right! He recognized the wind, the flames, and the variety of languages as signs of the coming of the Spirit. He recalled the poetic and prophetic words of Joel, and connected them with the events taking place before him. He spoke eloquently and firmly to the crowds, in such a way that many came to understand and believe as a result.

Peter's sudden ability as an orator, a solid witness to the faith, and as the one who took charge and brought a semblance of order into a scene threatened by the chaos of the crowds is probably the most powerful example of the power of the Holy Spirit that took place on that first Christian Pentecost. And, as we witness these changes in Peter, we can see the potential for growth and faith and service in each and every one of God's people as they are filled with the Holy Spirit. On our own, we have gifts and abilities, strengths and weaknesses, but when we receive the Holy Spirit, we have the power of the Risen Christ within us! Page 4

And the Holy Spirit *is* available for us to receive! For that was the whole point of the Pentecost event—to ensure that the message and the power of the Risen Christ would be received, understood, and passed on—to all people, in all places, across all time.

As we have discussed in recent weeks, the disciples and other followers had been taught by Jesus' stories and example; they had been witnesses to various parts of his betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension; and they had been commissioned to go out into the world as ambassadors of Jesus Christ. They were almost ready—yet they still needed help—that of the Advocate whom Jesus had promised to send on their behalf. And, in Peter's actions alone, we can see what a difference the coming of the Spirit made.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, and led by Peter, Jesus' followers were transformed from the group who had recently gathered in fear behind locked doors to a multi-lingual group of public witnesses to the faith. In a very short time, they went from needing Jesus' reassurance to being able to offer it to others in need. The men and women who had followed Jesus and been taught by him were now filled with Christ's Spirit and equipped to teach people from every nation about the meaning of their faith. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they grew away from chaos and confusion into confident leaders.

As for us, we need not await the *coming* of the Holy Spirit, as those early believers did. For once that first Christian Pentecost took place the Spirit has been present in the world and ready to dwell within any who would be open and receptive to the power of the Risen Christ within them. And so, the Holy Spirit is already ours, yet perhaps we need our annual observance and celebration of Pentecost in order to be reminded of the Spirit's presence and the possibilities it brings to our lives.

For one thing, remembering the events of that first Pentecost can serve to remind us of our responsibilities as Christians, and as bearers of the Holy Spirit. For the Spirit empowers us for a purpose—to live as witnesses to Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and to carry on the message of love and grace that Jesus exemplified in thought, word, and deed.

Thus, we are called to be guided by the scriptures,

to immerse ourselves in prayer,

to make time to worship, both in community and in solitude,

and to live as beacons of Christ's compassionate love for all people.

Pentecost reminds us that we are called and commissioned to love God, ourselves, and our neighbors; that we are to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God; and to be living examples of servant leadership, forgiveness, and spiritual companionship to others we meet along life's journey.

Even more than these important reminders, Pentecost can open the windows of our minds and hearts to the opportunities that the Holy Spirit offers to each of us for personal and spiritual growth. Celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit may serve to show us ways in which we can utilize our spiritual gifts to their greatest extents, to strengthen our commitments and to increase our service to God and God's people.

Just as Peter began to live into his full potential when the Holy Spirit began breathing in him, just being reminded of the presence and the power of that very same Spirit within us may lift us to new vistas of love and service.

As we give thanks for the presence of the Holy Spirit in each of our lives on this day, we might lift up the following questions in our prayers...

**As the wind of the Spirit rushes within and around me,
what is God saying that I need to hear more clearly?**

**As the flame of the Spirit illuminates my path,
what is God showing me that I need to see more fully?**

**As the power of the Spirit fills me,
what is it that I am being equipped and strengthened to do in
service to Christ?**

And finally, how can I become a better steward of the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling within me?

On this day, as we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' first disciples, let us look for, listen for, and be receptive to the power of the Risen Christ in our lives, and to the grand possibilities it offers to us and to God's world through us. And may we answer the call of the Spirit to serve in new ways. Amen.

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'