

Scriptures for Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009

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.'

Romans 8:26-27

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Sermon

"For God So Loved the World"

Rev. Donna Lee Merz

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

John 3:16

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The disciples knew it was coming.....but they didn't know when.....

Nor did they know what form it might take.....

All they really knew was that Jesus had promised to send it—

The Holy Spirit—

which he had described as the Advocate, the Helper, the Spirit of truth.

The purpose of the gathering that day—of Jesus' disciples and other believers and dozens of folk from a host of neighboring lands—was *not* to receive the Holy Spirit.

**The people had gathered to celebrate the harvest festival of Pentecost—
an agrarian Hebrew tradition from early Old Testament times.**

What happened when they were gathered would have been a complete surprise—a shock, really—as the sound of a violent wind came rushing through, and flickering tongues of fire appeared above each believer's head, and the apostles and other disciples heard themselves speaking in languages other than their own.

One can imagine that the initial reaction of those gathered would have been panic and distress, which eventually gave way to wonder and joy as it became clear that this was the coming of the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus, to be God's living, breathing, praying presence within them.

The reaction of the gathered crowds *was* fairly predictable.....

The believers were surprised, amazed, and literally inspired by the wind of God's Holy Spirit.

The eleven disciples quickly realized that this was the coming of the long-promised Advocate and, with Peter at the forefront, were able to provide an explanation and an *invitation* to the gathered masses.

And, of course, the crowd held the usual band of naysayers, sneering and jeering, accusing those speaking in foreign tongues as being drunk on new wine.

Of course their attitude would have been a manifestation of fear—for, yet again, the status quo was being disturbed in the midst of these people who were followers of Jesus.

Even today we meet up with such naysayers—people whose fears are aroused by those from other cultures, those who speak in languages different from their own, those who perceive the world differently than they.

And, in response to their fears, such folks lash out with accusations and anger which only serve to widen the gap between God's children from various nations and traditions.

Should *we* ever feel tempted to exclude, lash out against, or to fear those whom we perceive as ‘different’ than ourselves, the events of the first New Testament Pentecost provide us with the reminder that Christians were misunderstood and persecuted in early times and that, as Christians, we are called to live in such a way that promotes peace and unity among all God’s children.

For this is why God sent the Holy Spirit following Jesus’ ascension into heaven. The disciples had a mission to carry out—a message to share with all the world, in that time and beyond. There would soon come a time when there were no living disciples who had been taught personally by Jesus, yet for the Good News to thrive and flourish that living relationship was a necessity. And so, God sent the very breath of God’s spirit—the Hebrew *ruach*—the Greek *pneuma*—to dwell within each believer.

That indwelling Spirit of the Risen Christ would facilitate a relationship between disciples of Christ in every place, through all time, and it would equip each one to live as a bearer of Christ’s peace, love, and grace.

It is interesting that both the Greek and Hebrew words for Spirit are also the words used for breath—and the sound and function of our breathing is the same in every language. Whether or not we speak the same language as our neighbors, at our very centers, we breathe the same air, and we share the same spirit.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul describes the presence of the Holy Spirit in each one of us as guiding our prayers, truly praying within us ‘with sighs too deep for words’.

For not only does God hear and understand our prayers in every language, God senses our very breath, which is translated by the Spirit into the deepest form of prayer.

Pentecost was and continues to be a mysterious event, raising awe and wonderment among Christian believers.

Pentecost calls us to wonder how the Church might learn to understand the languages of the world’s people.

Pentecost calls us to listen to what others are saying so that we can understand different perspectives, and so that we may recognize the very same breath of God in others that we sense in ourselves.

Pentecost calls us to open our minds and our hearts, and—yes—our very spirits to God’s entire world of people—whatever language we speak, whatever tradition we follow—Pentecost calls us to listen, to dialogue, and to strive for peace and unity in the world.

**In speaking to the gathered crowd, Peter quoted Joel’s prophesy which stated that,
“God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...”**

Not a specific color of flesh, nor flesh from any particular place on earth,

Not upon those who speak a particular language,

Not upon those who believe in a certain way....

God declared that the Holy Spirit would be poured out *upon all flesh*.....

This sounds mysteriously familiar—like—like the voice of God!

Remember Isaiah’s prophesy regarding the incarnation—

**“Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and *all people* shall see
it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

**A prophesy which was echoed and affirmed by the angels on the
night of the Christ Child’s birth—**

**But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see--I
am bringing you good news of great joy for *all the people*.”**

**Just as God chose to enter into human life through the incarnation, Jesus Christ
allowed himself to die on the cross so that through his resurrection, death would be
overpowered and transcended—not just for himself, but for all people!**

We know this because of those wonderful words in the New Testament Gospel of John—that passage which so many of us learned by heart as children—each in our own language, and which we continue to treasure as adults—John 3:16...

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

For God so loved *the world*.....

all flesh.....all people

each one inspired by the very breath of God...

Listen to the richness of this passage, as we hear it in a variety of native languages, spoken by our own brothers and sisters in this particular congregation.....

English (Rev. DL)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

Tagalog (Filipino) (Caroline Blancia)

Ito ay sapagkat sa ganitong paraan inibig ng Diyos ang sanlibutan kaya ipinagkaloob niya ang kaniyang bugtong na Anak upang ang sinumang sumampalataya sa kaniya ay hindi mapahamak kundi magkaroon ng buhay na walang hanggan.

French (Français) (Irene Awara)

Car Dieu a tant aimé le monde qu'il a donné son Fils unique, afin que quiconque croit en lui ne périsse point, mais qu'il ait la vie éternelle.

Metta (Cameroon) (Rose Awara)

Spanish (Alicia Rodriguez)

Porque de tal manera amó Dios al mundo, que dió a su Hijo unigénito, para que todo aquel que cree en él, no perezca, mas tenga vida eterna.

Korean (Tae Shozuya, Kyung-won Kim, Hey-joung Han, Hosuk Lee)

하나님이 세상을
이처럼 사랑하사
독생자를 주셨으니
이른 저를 믿는 자
마다 멸망치 않고
영생을 얻게 하려
하심이니라

Urdu – (Zafar Malik)

This provides us with just a taste of the unique blend of languages spoken at that first Pentecost!

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

For God so loved *the world.....all flesh.....all people*

As with God’s incarnation in Christ, as with Christ’s death and resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit bore, yet again, God’s message of love and grace for *all people.*

There was one other response from within the gathered crowd on that first New Testament Pentecost, which followed Peter’s sermon that day—it was a response to receiving the Good News, it was a response of making a commitment to faith and life in Christ. The Book of Acts records that, “those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

This was a response made by people who had not expected their minds to be opened or their lives to change on that particular day....it was a response brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit. These new Christians included people from a variety of places, they came from many traditions, and spoke many languages—yet the same Spirit was breathing in each and every one.

As we go forth from this place on this Day of Pentecost,

May we recognize the Spirit of God, present in the winds that blow across our world—winds of change, winds of growth, winds of hope, of forgiveness, and grace—refreshing and uniting all God’s people;

and may we love, cherish, and respect the breath of the Holy Spirit—the indwelling Christ—in every human being and in ourselves. Amen.