

“Breathless”

Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b, Acts 2: 1-21

Pentecost/B, May 31, 2009

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Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost. Even though Pentecost happens every year, many of you may not be familiar with Pentecost. Many Protestants know little about such things as “feast” days, however, for folks who were raised in other traditions, this language is not only familiar, but comforting. Pentecost is one of the three major holy or feast days of the Christian Year. The other two are Christmas and Easter. If I asked you to tell someone who was unfamiliar with the Christian faith the significance of Christmas or Easter, you would have little trouble. However, if I asked you to describe what Pentecost means to someone new to the church or to your inquisitive child on the ride home from church this morning, you may not feel empowered to meet this challenge.

Pentecost simply means fifty days and it occurs fifty days after Easter Sunday. Therefore, like Easter, it is a moveable feast. The Christian feast of Pentecost is actually built on the Jewish festival of the Feast of the First Fruits which was also called Pentecost because it comes fifty days after Passover. The Feast of the First Fruits occurred at the harvest of the spring wheat, seven weeks after its planting close to Passover. People gathered at the Temple to make their offerings out of the abundance of their harvest and to give thanks to God. After their offering was made, the family gathered for a celebratory meal. This is why there would have been so many people in Jerusalem on this day, coming from places far and wide to make their offerings.

In the spirit of extravagant hospitality, a family would invite others to share this meal. You were to invite to the table “your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, the strangers, the orphans and the widows” with whom your family had a relationship. This imperative came from Deuteronomy where it says, “remember that you were a slave in Egypt.” (Deut. 16: 12a) Because you were once poor and powerless yourself, you were to remember those who are now poor and powerless in your midst. Therefore, the feast of the first fruits was not only a holiday of thanksgiving, it was also a vehicle to reverse poverty and powerlessness in the community.

Therefore, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was intended to celebrate the liberation and empowerment of God’s people through the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is more than the beginning of the Christian church. This morning we hear again the account of that first Pentecostal day. People had come from all over to celebrate the Jewish festival. However, Jesus’ followers, new Christians fearful and uncertain of their future, had gathered together in one place. In those fifty days since Jesus’ death and departure it had not yet been made clear to them how they were to proceed. They had stuck together as best they could. They understood the need to call new people into leadership positions. They had a sense that Jesus had commissioned them to make disciples, to spread and share the Good News with people, however, they had not yet begun to undertake this mission in a systematic way.

It is believed that Pentecost marks the true beginning of that ministry beyond them to the rest of the world. In the Christian year, during the time from Advent to Pentecost we learn about the life of Jesus and his ministry on earth. Now, in what we call common time, this time following Pentecost until Advent, we learn about the mission and ministry of the church. Pentecost signifies more than the beginning of the church. I believe the church was truly birthed at Easter. In the aftermath of the resurrection the disciples maintained community and prayed to God for a vision. They were already the church, albeit, without a clear direction or purpose. This is what happens at Pentecost. Jesus promised his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit and on the day of Pentecost he delivers.

This is not the first time God has blessed God's people with the spirit. There are many stories of the Spirit in both the Hebrew and Christian texts. There had been remarkable displays of God's spirit in the Bible, however those events were more personal. We think of Moses on the mountaintop or Jesus being transfigured. Each of these events was witnessed by a select few people, the most "inside" of insiders. Today is very different. This is a completely public event. Hundreds of people are witnesses to this event. However, not everyone understands what is happening. Some of them think that those who are speaking in their native language are drunk on cheap wine. They do not yet know that this is the work of the Holy Spirit, not the behavior of some irresponsible people.

The story says there is the sound like the rush of a violent wind that fills the house in which the disciples were gathered. Tongues of fire appear among them and everyone is filled with the Holy Spirit that empowers them to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. The crowd that had gathered heard the message proclaimed in their native tongue. Although the people who were speaking were all Galileans, they spoke in a way that everyone could understand. In this moment, God is breaking down all barriers and bringing people together to form a blessed community. Was the gift of the Holy Spirit the disciples' ability to speak in a language not their own, or was the gift their ability to understand for themselves the empowering word of God?

I believe what is so remarkable about this event is one's ability to understand for oneself what God intends for you to know. We receive the gift of discernment on the day of Pentecost. This does not happen without the intervention of the Holy Spirit. We can not discern God's will without the presence of the Holy Spirit. Discernment is more than knowing what other people have written. It is more than memorizing the creeds of the ancient church, or its prayers or its scripture. Discernment is about understanding for oneself the empowering word of God. These new disciples were swept away by this experience. The coming of the Holy Spirit leaves them breathless, wondering what has just happened, wondering how on earth they are going to explain this to someone else, wondering what life will be like from this moment forward.

God was calling people to experience something entirely new. To be sure that everyone had the chance to understand, God spoke in a way that people could understand. Hundreds of people were witnesses to what happened that day. Not everyone left Jerusalem ready to become disciples of Jesus. It may take many more years, many more

Pentecost events before that happens, for them and for us. Some times the Holy Spirit knocks us off our feet or smacks us upside the head and we don't get it. We seek some logical explanation for what has happened. Just like the folks present that morning, we try to explain away what has happened. It is less frightening to find a logical explanation than to admit you have had such a mystical encounter.

It is amazing to me that in the chaos one of the eleven disciples had the presence of mind to stand up and preach. Peter addresses the crowd and tries to help them understand what is happening. He has not planned this ahead of time. He seizes the gift to interpret and discern the will of God. He shares this gift with those gathered believing that they will then be empowered to go into the community and live out this mission for themselves. Clearly what Peter shared had a powerful impact on the crowd. We are later told that on that day, after hearing that one sermon, the church grew from one hundred people to three thousand. Holy Cow! Clearly the crowd was hungry for this empowering word, even though some of them were immediately cynical and scoffing. Many people were not fearful, but ready to receive this word and then act upon it in their own lives.

One writer comments, "this Pentecostal experience was in continuity, of course with the prophetic tradition of the Jewish people. Since the festival of Pentecost happened at the time of spring harvest, we might experience this Pentecost event as a different kind of harvest, yielding life-giving spiritual fruits." We have been asking you to consider what your spiritual gift might be. How could you share that gift with your church community not only this summer, but in the months ahead? Next week 26 young people will confirm their faith in this church. Historically, Pentecost is a day when people come to confirm their faith. As our young people celebrate confirmation, they fulfill Joel's prophecy that Peter reiterates today. On the day of Pentecost, "God pours out God's spirit upon all flesh, sons and daughters shall prophesy, and our young men shall see visions and old men shall dream dreams." This is the gift of Pentecost, the belief that God is still speaking, that God still has a mission and ministry for God's people and that you have been given the gifts to fulfill this mission.

This is more than a day to wear red or hang red streamers or share a birthday cake at coffee hour. Like any other birthday, Pentecost offers us a chance to reflect on where we have been in the past year and discern where God is calling us to be. Where is God calling us as a community and how might you play a role in that larger vision? Three thousand people became new Christians as a result of that Pentecost event. Three thousand people unleashed on the world with the power to share the Good News with others. You have a story to tell. You have a personal experience to share. You have the power to do extraordinary things if only you accept this gift and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit. Once you have discovered your gift, it is what we do with it that really matters. Could Peter have known that so many people would come to believe when he stood up to speak? I doubt it. You too have no idea the impact you could have on the world when you claim your gift and use it to the glory of God. Therefore, on this Pentecostal Day, may we be filled with the Holy Spirit, unafraid and undeterred to be the people God intends for us to be! May it be so! Amen