

WORSHIP

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Pentecost 2020

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Acts 2: 1-13

Pentecost has always been a joyous celebration in our church tradition. I have always loved Pentecost and hearing the story. One year in seminary I was able to worship at a Quaker Meeting house on the Day of Pentecost. If you aren't familiar, at a typically Quaker meeting the group gathered sits in silence and you wait for the Holy Spirit to move you to speak. Towards the end of the service our silence was broken by the sounds of little feet and lots of shushing. I opened my eyes and saw a line of construction paper flames walk past the window and come in to the meeting house. The children had a separate lesson but were coming to join us for the end of our meeting. They had made hats out of paper, with wide bands around their heads and large red, orange, and yellow flames attached. They came in and sat on a pew, so excited to join us for just a portion of the meeting. For me that day, I heard the Holy Spirit speak in the form of wiggling, the corrective clearing of a throat by parents, and the children's excitement to share what they had learned. This is an image I have held dearly to and it summed up what I thought Pentecost was about. Joy, sharing, excitement. But on a day when our hearts are heavy from violence, injustice, sickness, when innocent men are being killed and those who have a right to be heard are being silenced, another side of Pentecost comes to mind. It is the confusion, the hunger, and deep need for the hope that was felt on that first day. Pentecost is a bit outlandish when you read it. The story of Pentecost helps set up Acts. After Christ died, rose from the dead, and then ascended in to heaven,



we hear about how the followers of Jesus tried their best. I love hearing the stories of the early church as they tried to figure things out, confident in what Christ had taught them, led by the Holy Spirit, and I may be projecting but they probably weren't completely certain of what they were doing. Yet they carried on. The historical and social context of Acts is vastly different than our world today, but if we look closely we can always see our struggle and work as the church is not vastly different than those of the people who were in the house when the Holy Spirit came to them.

There is so much activity in the story of Pentecost, you can get lost or lose focus on what to pay attention to. We can be overwhelmed like the crowd who came to see what disturbance they heard. Do we look at the tongues of fire that appear over the believers or all the languages they began to speak? When scripture or life is so active and we don't know where to listen or where to look, I say we start with what we know.

Our scripture opens with it was morning and "they were all together in one place" (v.1). This gives us a sense that all the believers were all together demonstrating a sense of unity among them. The irony of being apart from each other while celebrating Pentecost is not lost on me. I know we wish we could immolate this opening scene these days. In the few verses before, the disciples have been restored to the number 12 with the selection of Matthias. The whole group is waiting in anticipation for an event that has been foretold. They are ready and they are hopeful. And what they are hopeful for what occurs next. The dramatic action of Pentecost begins here. The scripture reads, "Suddenly, from heaven, there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting" (v.2). The Spirit descends from heaven and make's its presence known by noise and a sense of expanding in the place they were staying. This is the not gentle breath rustling the leaves we often imagine. Jana Childers writes that, "Many Christians have become accustomed to thinking of the Holy Spirit as more of a Hawaiian breeze than a Chicago gale" (Feasting on the Word A.3, 17). Well the first appearance of the Holy Spirit to the believers is a



scene of sound and feeling and sight, when we hear in the next verse that “divided tongues, as of fire...rested on them.” This sign which marks them as children of God, children of the divine.

I think Childers is right that we are accustomed the gentle breeze imagery of the Holy Spirit because that makes us comfortable. In our prayers, sacraments, and creeds we are confident in calling up on or proclaiming our belief in the Holy Spirit. Yet, we become timid when we are asked to examine the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit can lead us to boldness as it led the people gathered on Pentecost, but we worry that the Spirit might lead us to places that are uncomfortable or difficult. We might be asked to do or say things we normally would not want to do. So, we have relegated the third person of the Trinity to an image of a summer breeze that only comforts us and nudging us down the right path. When in truth, the scripture shows us an image of the Holy Spirit that could blow us on to a challenging path, and silence all of our verbal protests, so that we are led in to bold action led by the bold Holy Spirit. On Pentecost, the world saw the Holy Spirit loudly and visibly show its self and we should not and cannot do anything to muffle the Spirit.

And then as the scripture tells us, a crowd of faithful Jewish people gathers at what they heard. These were people from different lands who were divided by language but united by their faith and the trust in the Law of Moses. They heard the same message in different tongues. The crowd said, “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (v.11). It is noted that all were amazed and perplexed. Yet, that is where their common experience and unity ended. Some in the crowd sought meaning in the messages that were being spoken to them. While others scoffed and were dismissive they accused the believers who had received the Holy Spirit of being drunk. The church has just been founded and already they are facing those who want to ignore the wonder that is before them. We do not know why part of the crowd felt the need to disparage the believers who had just received the Holy Spirit. Perhaps they could not comprehend this gift from God. Perhaps they were scared of what this could mean to their lives upsetting their status quo. Perhaps they knew in their hearts



that the world had changed but they wanted to deny and stop this building movement and continuation of God's revelation to God's people. But the Holy Spirit is still available to them.

Finally, we see Peter appear in front of the crowd, with the other eleven disciples behind him. He repeats the words of the Prophet Joel, reminding those in the crowd of the prophecy that would have been familiar to them. Peter reminds them that God has promised to pour God's spirit on to all of those God loves. Men and Women, Old and Young, Slave and Free will receive the spirit and be given the gift of prophesy. They will be able to share the message of the great deeds of God of the teaching of Jesus Christ. Those upon whom God has given the spirit will be the ones preparing the way for Christ's second coming. Peter reminds the crowd do not dismiss them, do not call them drunk or crazy, those who have received the Holy Spirit are the ones who are doing God's work. It may not look acceptable or proper. Those who seek understanding will receive the spirit and be saved. And those who cast off what is in front of them still have the option to accept the truth.

Then the story of Pentecost continues with Peter giving the first sermon of the church. The continued good news of that day is that many in the crowd heard this, accepted what they saw, and their hearts were changed. In verse 37 the author of Luke reports, " Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers,[i] what should we do?" 38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.... So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added" (v. 37-41). The power of the Spirit was no restricted, not that it could be, but it reached those whose hearts were seeking change and an eternal truth of Christ.



I feel that over the past few days we are witnessing a scene of our own Pentecost morning. The Holy Spirit is not a demure nudge whispering for change. It is gale force winds and loud cries for justice, compassion, and safety. We see crowds gathering at the scene, some of the crowds seek meaning deep in their hearts from what they are witnessing and other are ready to dismiss what they are seeing because of fear or ignorance. Each voice speaks in a way that is unique to itself has the opportunity to tell the truth and reach one of those people in the crowd who is questioning. There have been voices that have always been telling the truth, that racism is a problem and there are systems inherent in our culture that uphold it. Yet, we have tried to keep these voices as light as breezes and only at times have we allowed them to build to the volume of a divine rushing wind. Yet, now we can make way for the Holy Spirit to take these voices have them be heard by those who close their ears, their eyes, and their hearts.

Pentecost is said to be the birth of the Church, the church universal. More importantly, Pentecost is the beginning of the church's mission. When we read further in to the Book of Acts, we can see the Holy Spirit gives wonders and signs, it empowers people for the miracle of healing, economic sharing and community, it imbues people with courage in the face of threat, and guidance in major decision. I think verse 4 alludes to this well. It says, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." The Spirit gave them ability. Now in the verse it is specifically referring to the many languages that were spoken by the believers. Yet, we can look at it in a larger sense. It gave them the ability to come from the house where they had received the Spirit. The spirit gave them ability to be the church. It gave Peter the ability to stand up before a crowd. He reminded them of the words of the Prophet Joel and preached the good news of Jesus Christ, when previously he denied knowing Jesus in the face of the crowd. It gives us the ability to see when we have been wrong but gives us the opportunity for grace in truth. The Holy Spirit gave them the ability to cause a spectacle in front of all of the other Jews that had come from far and wide to Jerusalem. To show the crowd the power of



God. That though Jesus had come and died, resurrected on the third day and then ascended into heaven, we were not alone. God's breathe, God's spirit was given to us to being the mission of the church. The spirit gave them, the spirit give us the ability. We have the ability to proclaim the Resurrection as the new normal. We have the ability to show the world what Christ's kingdom really is and what it is not. Whatever comes before us we have the ability and we must use it.

Today, The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to stand in front of a crowd, that dismisses the truth we are called by God to share, and proclaim the Good News to continue Christ's mission of realizing God's Kingdom here on Earth. It requires us to speak in different ways. It requires us not to back down. It requires us not to reject those who disagree but educate and share, even when we are tired and it feels that their hearts are forever hardened. The Holy Spirit calls us to say that enough is enough. The Freedom of the Spirit will allow us to reject and reform systems we have built up that bring down the Children of God. It allows us to act in love. Like the early church, they set forth on the day of Pentecost with great work that needed to be done, and there is work before all of us. Many people have been working to share God's promise and tell about the world Christ came to give us, and now the rest us of.

When we are successful, many come to Christ which means proclaiming justice and love in a world that prefer hate and violence, systems over freedom, and a world that take the breath of God from God's children. When we are successful each person's life is held precious and the presence of the Holy Spirit is seen. So like that first Pentecost, we can gather in a spirit of unity, face the crowd, use our voices for God's work. We have the ability With God's love, Christ's grace, and the Holy Spirit's power to change the world and change the system, we have the ability to say no and like on Pentecost we can make it possible for hearts to be changed and for people to breath and hearts to receive mercy and the Holy Spirit.

