

May 30, 2004

Pentecost

"The Liberating Spirit"

Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

They'd been waiting – just like Jesus told them to wait. For 10 days, they'd been waiting, waiting in a rented room in Jerusalem.

There were about 120 of them: the 11 Apostles, the faithful women from Galilee, Jesus' Mother, Mary, and, surprisingly, Jesus' brothers, too. They were waiting for what Jesus called, The Promise. "Wait," he told them, "wait for The Promise."

While they waited they went to prayer services in the Temple, prayed in their room and reorganized themselves – they picked a 12th Apostle to replace Judas. And, no doubt, they spent time wondering what lay ahead of them.

What they did know was that Jesus had given them a Mission Impossible. "You are my witnesses to all the nations of the world," he told them. Well, how do you suppose this crowd of fishermen, wandering women and country bumpkins were going to pull that off? They hadn't been to the right schools, didn't know anyone in power and were themselves powerless.

But Jesus told them to wait. They'd understand it better then.

The morning of the 10th day was the Feast of Pentecost. It was a big day in Jerusalem. Pentecost was the favorite of the three big festivals in the Jewish calendar. Pentecost celebrated the spring grain harvest and Jews from all over the world gathered for the feast. It was called "Pentecost" because it came 50 days after the first day of Passover.

Pentecost was a national holiday and a religious feast at the same time – sort of like the 4th of July and Christmas celebrated together.

Jerusalem was teeming with people gathered together to celebrate the feast. Already that morning thousands were gathering in the Temple for Morning Prayers.

Jesus' disciples gathered one more time in their rented quarters. Some, maybe all of them, would join the crowd nearby in the Temple for prayers.

Suddenly, something happened, something beyond words. There was a sound – it was *like* a rushing wind, Luke reports. And they saw something, too. They saw something *like* tongues of fire touching each one of them. Notice that what they saw and heard was "like" wind and fire. This happening was bigger than words can describe.

What we do know is that wind and fire are signs of God's presence in the Bible. When God comes all humans can say is that it was like....

Whatever else happened that day, one thing is sure: God came and God touched his people and everything changed. They changed and before long the world changed.

Apparently, God's touch blew the doors off the room. The disciples found themselves in the Temple court in the great crowd of worshippers. And the crowd heard and saw something, too. God was near and when God is near people tend to notice.

More surprising yet, the disciples found themselves preaching to the crowd in languages they'd never learned. It was a miracle to be sure, a miracle with a clear purpose. Right there on the Day of Pentecost, the nations heard the disciples proclaim the mighty works of God in their native tongues. Just like Jesus told them they'd become witnesses to the nations.

Needless to say, the crowd was astonished. Who expected to hear their own language in Jerusalem? And who could have expected to hear these uneducated locals eloquently preaching native languages?

No wonder the people were also perplexed. "What can this mean?" they asked each other. Some people still wonder what that day means to us here and now.

As always, there were some cynics in the crowd who figured the disciples were drunk. How else can you explain their behavior?

Well, it was an amazing morning. If for no other reason, it was astonishing because most of Jesus' disciples had not distinguished themselves with courage or eloquence. The last time we heard from the inner circle of disciples, they were running for their lives some claiming they'd never heard of Jesus. But, then, Pentecost - and nothing was ever the same.

Peter somehow got things quieted down and began to explain what was going on. "First," he said, "these people are not drunk. After all, it's only 9:00 in the morning. Most of haven't had breakfast yet! The serious partying doesn't begin until after dark tonight."

"No, this is the ancient promise of God. Remember how God told the prophet Joel that someday God would pour out his Spirit on all people. 'Your sons and your daughters will prophecy and your old men and your young men will dream dreams.' This promise is for every person on earth."

What this means, Peter added, is that all the nations of the earth will be healed, every class of people will be liberated, God's broken world will be repaired. And this is it.

The great story told in the Bible has its proper and surprising ending. God sent Jesus Christ to begin this great promise for all human kind. Believe it and you're part of The Promise.

And here we are nearly 2,000 years later, heirs of and participants in The Promise. It's Pentecost Sunday, the celebration of that great day when the Christian Church was born. We've gathered to celebrate the epochal event that formed the Church. And we're here to celebrate the Holy Spirit who supplied the power that continues to form the Church in the image of Christ.

Supposedly, then, Pentecost Sunday is a big deal. Barbara Brown Taylor wonders why this great festival of the Christian year seems lost to most congregations. Pentecost is, after all, one of the three big days of the Christian calendar: Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, a distant third. Why don't we celebrate it? Taylor wonders. We should celebrate the day a wind "blew through the back streets of Jerusalem and gave the church everything necessary to turn the world upside down."

Why no Pentecost parades? she wonders. No Pentecost pageants in the churches either. No Hallmark cards for Pentecost and no one inviting people over for Pentecost Dinner.

Taylor suspects Pentecost is a distant third Christian celebration because people get spooked by talk about the Holy Spirit, or the Holy "Ghost" as the Spirit used to be called. Or, people have

seen Pentecostal Christians in action and think such behavior is best left to the Pentecostals (*Journal for Preachers, Pentecost, 2003, p. 37*).

Will Willimon, Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, asks the same question another way. He was once asked by a worshipper at Duke Chapel why he didn't hear much about the Holy Spirit from Willimon.

Putting his tongue firmly in his cheek, Willimon answered,

"The risks and pitfalls of working with the Holy Spirit are so great in preaching, it is better to work alone....The Holy Spirit tends to be pushy, assertive and wants to take over....Our solemn duty as preachers is to protect the flock from unwarranted and divisive intrusions of God. Control is one of the chief functions of the clergy" (*Journal for Preachers, Pentecost, 2001, p. 31*).

Seriously, why do we tend to ignore Pentecost and the Holy Spirit? For some, I suppose, it's fear of looking like a fool. And people like us value social acceptance so highly, foolish behavior is not an option.

But notice that the disciples didn't become weird at Pentecost. In fact, the Holy Spirit worked in them to make what they said and did acceptable to the people present. Pentecost was about getting the good news into the community and the world in an reasonable and understandable way. Pentecost was powerful to be sure, but not weird.

Beneath the fear of looking foolish lies a larger and reasonable fear. In the Bible, the presence of the Holy Spirit always is a matter of control. After all, the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus who calls his disciples to give him their lives. And handing your life over to someone else is always loss of control. The presence of Jesus' Spirit in our lives costs us our lives, our ambitions and our purposes. We have a new director of life and he sets the agenda.

We tend to prefer being spiritually inadequate with control of our lives and purposes to handing ourselves over to God. We've developed a "religion lite" free of inconvenient demands like giving our lives away.

Most Protestants much prefer the Gospel of John's Pentecost to the story in Acts. John tells that long story in two sentences, "Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (20:22). No powerful wind or fire here. No explosion of the soul turning shy and backward men and women into eloquent preachers and prophets. No public demonstrations of faith. Just a quiet breath.

Barbara Brown Taylor calls this the "Gentle Breath" version of Pentecost. She calls the version in Acts "God's Sneeze." And who wants God to sneeze into their soul and turn everything upside down? We prefer for God not to blow the doors off our lives or our churches.

But notice that both version of Pentecost turn out the same. In both cases, the consequence of receiving the Holy Spirit is mission to the world. In John and in Acts the disciples are propelled out into the world to tell the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

The point of Pentecost is the witness of the church to the world. In Acts, no sooner was Pentecost over then the church was feeding the hungry, healing the sick, freeing prisoners and offering salvation to everyone.

Remember the Gospel Lesson? Jesus told the disciples they would do everything he did and more. "My ministry is now yours," he said. "Remember what I did? Go and do the same.

"And by the way, you will need help. I'm sending The Helper (John's word for the Holy Spirit). The Helper will give you everything necessary to continue my words and works."

Now then, that means our cry today and every day is simple, yet profound. If you want to be Jesus' man or woman, if you want to do God's work on earth, if you want to be caught up in Jesus' dream for the world, if you want the Spirit of Jesus to remake you, just say it, "Help."