

Pentecost, Yr. B
May 20, 2018
Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27

In a recent conversation someone expressed surprise at finding out that Pentecost is considered the third most important feast of the church year. It certainly doesn't get the boost from the secular culture that Christmas and Easter do. It is, however, as you all know, the birthday of the church, but it's much more than that. It's nothing less than the assurance that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, no longer bounded by time and space, remains here, present, and available to us. I think the feast may also get short shrift because we're a little fuzzy about what we mean when we talk about the Holy Spirit. When I was growing up, and I assume it was the same for most of you, it was the Holy Ghost, which was actually even more confusing, I think..

A couple of weeks ago I used a visual aid in a sermon and mentioned that I rarely do so. Part of the reason I don't is that I think those aids can often distract from the message. Here's a good example. It's a story about an evangelist who took his revival show on the road. At each stop, he'd hire a small boy to sit in the rafters with a dove in a cage. Toward the end of his sermon he'd shout for the Holy Spirit to come down and the boy was supposed to open the cage. One evening, he called for the HS to descend and nothing happened. He called again, more loudly. Still nothing. And then he heard the anxious voice of the little boy calling down from the rafters, "Sir, a yellow cat just ate the Holy Spirit, Shall I throw down the cat?"

Putting that aside, though, let's think about what we mean when we talk about the Holy Spirit. It appears in the OT, hovering over the waters at creation, giving guidance to Israel's leaders, speaking through the prophets. The alternate reading for today is from Ezekiel when the breath of God comes upon the dead, dry bones of Israel and brings it back to life. It appears in the NT at Jesus' baptism and here in these scriptures as well as throughout Luke's Gospel and the **Book of Acts**. **In his Gospel, Luke wrote about the Spirit present in the life of Christ; in Acts, it's about that same spirit, now present to the whole world, through the body of Christ in his church, through all those who follow Christ. Think back to when Jesus started his ministry, when he stood up in the synagogue and read from Isaiah, you'll remember the words were, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me and he has anointed me..." and then he goes on to describe what that spirit wants him to be about: to bring good news to the afflicted, to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...." He doesn't start with himself; rather he starts with the energy and vision of the Spirit of God.**

Pentecost brings the season of Easter to a close. And those two feasts belong together, because Pentecost completes what began at Easter. Without

Pentecost, Easter and what we heard today from John, which is part of Jesus' farewell discourse, would be just that: saying good-bye to Jesus. He would have ascended to Heaven and left his followers alone with nothing but fond memories. But in the gospel, he promises to send them an Advocate, which is the spirit or essence of Christ himself, now no longer bound by time and space, but with his life, his vision, his energy alive and available to them. Easter is the new creation, reassuring us that what God did for Jesus at the resurrection, he will do for us and for all creation. And the spirit of Jesus coming at Pentecost is God giving us what's needed for Jesus' agents in the world. That's the central Christian affirmation – that God's good creation, now incomplete and out-of-joint because of sin and ignorance, is being redeemed. That, in the fullness of time, all the forces of rebellion will be defeated – and all creation, Paul tells us, is waiting, groaning for that moment. And when it does arrive, God will be, again in Paul's language, All in all – or in the language of Isaiah, the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as waters cover the sea. That's the promise upon which our hope is founded; that's God's plan. That the entire creation will be ruled with life-giving wisdom exercised by humans bearing God's image. That all sounds pretty overwhelming, doesn't it?

But probably no more overwhelming than that original Pentecost. The English translation says that people were confused, amazed, bewildered and perplexed. But the Greek is even more colorful. It can be translated as saying that they were in an uproar, blown away, thoroughly disoriented. And that was just the listeners! The speakers, those men and women who had been timid and afraid and directionless, now were fearless, and filled with God's power to continue the work of Christ in the world.

I'd like to say a word about that power. It's available to us as followers of Christ. But do we want it? I think I've told you about hearing God described, quite in line with today's readings as the power plant at the center of the universe, and remembering, while I was growing up, that my grandfather was a dam tender on the Wisconsin River. When we visited on Sundays we kids could go with him down to the dam and walk through that structure that was holding back that huge wall of water and which contained humming turbines. I remember being aware, even on that small scale, of the incredible power being generated. So the question – do we want to put ourselves in proximity with the power plant at the center of the universe? One preacher talked about attending a charismatic church service and being a bit undone by it all. She said that she felt like she had been caught in the middle of a thunderstorm. So, she said, I did what you're supposed to do – "I made myself very small and held perfectly still. Lightning did not strike me, which was an answer to my prayer, but in the time since then I have

wondered about my reaction. Was it simply a reaction to that kind of worship or was it more than that? If I had been in that room on that first Pentecost day, would I have done the same thing? Or would I have said, 'Oh, God, if you're about to pour out your spirit and this is what it looks like, would you please skip me?' Am I the only one? Who else wants an umbrella when it looks like the Spirit is about to start raining down with wind and with fire?" Good questions, aren't they? Do we want that kind of energy, that kind of spirit, or do we prefer the status quo?

If we choose to ask for the energy, we should know that a translation of the word Paraclete, with a sense broader than just Advocate, is one who stands alongside. If we choose to let the HS in, we can be assured of guidance and insight, comfort in both the sense of courage and reassurance, and perhaps most importantly, the knowledge of God's presence.

A final thought, which is about the fact that everyone understood what was being said. Our world today, with its divisions more numerous than those outlined in the Acts reading, is sorely in need of that kind of understanding. If Luke were writing today, it would go something like this: **HOW IS IT THAT WE ALL HEAR? AMERICANS, PERUVIANS, MEXICANS, CUBANS, GERMANS, FRENCH, INDIANS, BURUNDIANS, SOUTH AFRICANS, CHINESE, IRANIANS, IRAQIS, KOREANS, HAITIANS.** You get the idea; I think our list would be a lot longer than Luke's. In our shrinking and often antagonistic world, we're more aware than ever of difference and division, of that out-of-jointedness that I spoke of earlier. What the Gospel tells us is that God's vision, God's desire, God's plan for the world, is greater than all our differences. It tells us that if we can commit ourselves to living in the spirit that, as the psalm tells, renews the face of the earth, we will receive the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, gentleness. N.T. Wright puts it this way: Those who have heard the message know that every act of love, every deed done in Christ and by the Spirit, every work of true creativity - doing justice, making peace, healing families, reverencing creation - each of those is an earthly event in a long history of things that implement Jesus' own resurrection and anticipate that final new creation and act as signposts of hope. Dare we hope that the spirit praying in us is praying that we will be made ready and receptive to its presence? Amen.