

**Sermon: Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017 – Acts 2**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

- Pentecost – the rush of wind, tongues as of flames resting on the believers, language barriers transcended in an ecstatic display of holy power.
- Pentecost – known by some as “the birthday of the Church,” when those who had committed themselves to the words and the way of Jesus had that mission empowered by the Divine.
- Pentecost – the day of the Holy Spirit.

For some gathered here today, Pentecost has been a well-known, lifelong part of our Christian worship experience. A bit of casual reading on the topic reveals that it has always been one of the great festival days of the Orthodox Church; in the Moravian Church it is a day specifically set aside for a love feast; Pentecost and Pentecost Eve are significant celebrations within Scandinavian Lutheran Churches; and those of you who grew up in the UK will recall the Church of England’s Whitsunday celebrations.

For others, myself included, Pentecost made a bit of a late arrival. The congregation I grew up in Regina didn’t really follow a “liturgical calendar” as such – we had Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter, with Advent and Lent playing lesser roles, but I don’t recall any religious festivals beyond that. Then in the 1980s, many United Church congregations started using the lectionary and following the colours of the Church year, Pentecost sort of “re-entered the room,” and we learned of this curious, ancient celebration of wind and flame and Spirit that was for many centuries second in importance only to Easter.

And what about that first Christian Pentecost? As described in the second chapter of Acts, people had gathered from many nations for a Jewish festival, variously known as the “Feast of Harvest,” “Feast of Weeks”, “Day of First Fruits”, or “closing festival.” Because it was fifty days after Passover, the Greek-speaking Jews called it by the name Pente-cost, their name for “the feast of the fiftieth day.” *The Jewish Encyclopedia* records that “In Palestine the grain harvest lasted seven weeks and was a season of gladness. It began with the harvesting of the barley during the Passover and ended with the harvesting of the wheat at Pentecost, the wheat being the last cereal to ripen.” This strikes me as a busy time: harvesting these two grain crops and gathering in Jerusalem for these two celebrations, and the resultant crowd in that city would have been both celebrative and multi-national.

Within the group that came to Jerusalem from Jewish communities around the Mediterranean, was a much smaller sub-group, numbered about 120, of Jesus-following Jews, mostly or entirely from Galilee. Still maintaining their Jewish traditions, they had come to the city for this feast of the fiftieth day, but stayed together as they attempted to meld their long-standing Jewish faith with these new ways of Jesus. There is some suggestion that they re-assembled in the Upper Room where they had shared communion with Jesus. And in that assembly, *their* Pentecost took a radical new turn, with the big, assertive action of the Holy Spirit, changing them and their movement forever.

As mentioned earlier in today’s worship service, the Holy Spirit was not a newly-revealed entity that made its debut on the first Christian Pentecost. The creation legend in Genesis (ch.1) speaks of the Spirit swirling over the waters and giving all creatures our first breath. In the story of Noah (Genesis 8), the Spirit had the task of drying up the floodwaters. When Ezekiel looked out at a field of dry bones, wondering if his nation was dead or could come to life again, the Spirit gave him an object lesson on what it would look like if the bones were enlivened by the Divine. When the prophets Micah and Zechariah had challenging words to share with the rulers of the land, the Spirit gave them the gumption to do so. When young Mary was informed that she would bear the child of promise, it was the Spirit that overshadowed her, and when that child came of age to accept his mission in life, the Spirit descended on him like a dove. And then there is the entire tradition of the “spirit of wisdom,” an expression of divine power in feminine terms. You can take these scripture stories however you wish, but it is clear that within the narrative of our faith tradition, the Holy Spirit is pictured as actively engaged in our journey with God.

In these stories, from the beginning of time to the life of Christ, the Spirit gave life, the spirit gave courage to confront, the spirit cleared away confusion and promised to dwell within those who were willing to speak and act on behalf of God and God’s children.

The Christ-followers who had gathered for Pentecost would have been well aware of these ways that the Holy Spirit accompanied their journey thus far, and may well have been looking for the Spirit to put in a

fresh appearance. The way forward from here was unclear: how were they to live up to their commitment to follow the ways of Jesus, while remaining faithful to the religion of their birth? They could continue to gather in Jesus' name in semi-secrecy, but for what purpose and by whose authority? Or if they disbanded as a group and tried to re-integrate into their local synagogues while encourage the changes put forth by Jesus, would they be accepted? Their devotion was high, but their direction was a bit shaky. And at this point, comes the Spirit.

The classic scripture lesson for Pentecost Sunday is the reading we heard today from the second chapter of Acts, but if we dig a bit deeper into Acts a three-step process is described:

In Acts 1:8, the scripture that my friend Rev. Michael Ward explored with you last Sunday, we hear these words from the risen Christ just before his ascension: "when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Then comes today's reading, of the Holy Spirit coming to and filling the lives of the gathered Christ-followers in a showy display of wind and flame and language. But the work of melding the power of the Holy Spirit and the purpose of the fledgling Church was not quite done.

If we fast-forward a couple of chapters, to the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, we hear that the newly-energized followers of Jesus got busy right after that day of Pentecost, speaking his words of forgiveness and inclusion, bringing his healing touch to those in distress, and had even managed to irritate the same religious leaders who had put Jesus to death. Much was happening, but it was still a bit haphazard. So that first group of Christians gathered again, and prayed, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, seeking the boldness that the prophets of old had exhibited in the face of great danger. And at the end of this prayer is this simple result: (Acts 4:31) "When they were finished praying, the place where they were meeting was shaken. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to proclaim God's message with boldness."

You'll recall, that when we looked at the Judaeo-Christian experience of the Holy Spirit from the beginning of time to the life of Christ, the Spirit was the aspect of God which gave the gift of life, the spirit gave courage to confront, the spirit cleared away confusion and promised to dwell within those who were willing to speak and act on behalf of God and God's children. The Spirit, in many ways, is about the business of proclamation, clear, courageous, timely. And now, that same Spirit came to these first Christians, giving them both the power and the responsibility to do and be all of this: to affirm God's gift of life, to confront ideologies and individuals who try to squelch the lives of others, to be the voice for the voiceless, to BE the presence of Christ in a world of need.

That, my friends, is an awesome and humbling responsibility. At Pentecost we are reminded that the Holy Spirit has entered not only my life as a follower of Jesus, but has placed heavy expectations on our gathered life as the Church. We – as individuals of conscience, and even more so, as a Church – have the responsibility of speaking up on behalf of the oppressed, and the Spirit promises to give us the courage to find that voice. The Spirit has given us the ability and the responsibility of seeking health and wholeness in our world, through the tough work of reconciliation and the tender work of healing ministries. The Spirit calls us to be faithful and learned and truthful in equal measure, our hearts and minds fully engaged in this work even when chaos and disinformation seem to have the upper hand. On this day, we are reminded of the Church's calling to be the ongoing body of Christ in the world, summoning our deepest hopes and inspiring us to reach beyond comfort and propriety in Jesus' name.

We also have cause to pause, and reflect on the damage that can be done and has been done when the Church has misinterpreted, misused and abused its power: enjoying the advantages of coercive power and ignoring the responsibilities of service, decimating the lives of indigenous peoples, targeting people of colour and inciting homophobia, diminishing opportunities for women, and encouraging the shunning of those who believe differently from the norm. As those entrusted with Christ's mission in the world, we Christians have a lot to answer for, and we pray for God's own forgiveness as we seek a new way forward.

But rather than going silent – or becoming cautious – or being so overwhelmed by the shame of demeaning things that continue to be done in the name of Christ – today is a day to return to source, and be renewed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. As we are lured into a vortex of hopelessness by the barrage of

factoids about our very troubled world, the Spirit tells us that true, empowered engagement need not lead to despair. As Christ's presence in the world, as those who understand each breath we take as a holy gift of God, we are to engage the world with our eyes and ears and minds wide-open to see what's going on, and to address it with transformative acts of love. We cannot remain idle when we know the depth of suffering caused by the African drought and as we were reminded at yesterday's forum on climate, we cannot be silent as the earth continues to warm, and women's lives are challenged, and nature is treated with disrespect. We must keep learning and growing in our connection to the LGBTQ community. We must continue the walk of reconciliation with our first nations sisters and brothers, and insist that the current Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls inquiry get on track. And we do these things, not because we land in a particular place in the political spectrum, but because it is our duty to speak and act and love in the name of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We have been given the job of going to the difficult places Jesus would go, of being in friendship and solidarity with the marginalized people Jesus spent his time with, of telling the powerful to back off their harmful agendas just as Jesus did, of risking our reputations in favour of the radical demands of Christ's own love. On this day of Pentecost, amidst the dazzling swirl of words and colours and impressive displays of power, we are called back to the power of love, and revitalized in our commitment to put it into action every time we can.

On this day, as we remember a gift from long ago, that gift comes alive and calls us to action. May we receive that gift and in it, be bold in proclaiming the amazing love of Christ. Amen.

References cited:

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