

**Sermon: Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021 – Acts 2: 1-21**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

*Today we remember the first Christian Pentecost, an event that happened in Jerusalem. At the time of this recording, a truce has been declared in Gaza and East Jerusalem, and we pause for a moment to pray for peace in that place.*

Watch at <https://youtu.be/qJn5iQIYaT8>

I am an unabashed fan of Pentecost, to the point of saying this: if the festival of Pentecost did not already exist, I think someone would need to invent it. For when I look at the story of that first Christian Pentecost, it reads like a positive, life-affirming prescription, written to cure some of the biggest ills of 2021.

A quick recap: When the day of Pentecost came – linked with an already-existing Jewish festival, known as Shavuot– “they” were all together in one place, the Cenacle in old Jerusalem. The “they” referred to here, would be the inner circle who had been with Jesus. There was then an ecstatic spiritual experience: the Holy Spirit overwhelms the room as a rush of wind, as “tongues as of fire”, and as recognizable languages.

And who were those listeners, the witnesses to this? They were “devout Jews from every nation under heaven, living in Jerusalem.” Later in the sermon I’ll show a slide placing the various locations named in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts, as there is a particular omission that is worth noting, but in general terms the locations named ring the Mediterranean. And while we assume there were pilgrims from these places visiting Jerusalem for Shavuot it appears that these witnesses were residents of the city who had come “from away” some time earlier.

The witnesses, astonished at hearing their mother tongues being spoken, are also bemused by this cacophony of sound, joking that these Jesus people were intoxicated, not spiritually gifted. Peter, the same impetuous one who was so close to Jesus, addresses this accusation by hearkening back to the prophet Joel, naming what was happening in their midst as an outpouring of the Spirit, and an inauguration of a new spiritual era.

So what does this unusual, chaotic, thrilling day of Pentecost bring to us in 2021?

First, Pentecost brings us up close and personal to the power of the Holy Spirit, which shows up in a way that cannot be ignored. As described in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts, the Spirit personally makes itself known visibly, resembling tongues of fire above the believers, and as a soundtrack of individual believers uttering previously-unknown languages. But it also comes as thunderous wind – a group experience felt by all.

While God may be pictured as a distant entity who requires that we initiate the contact, the Spirit is quite the opposite: the Spirit shows up, unannounced, and moves things around. The Spirit calls me back from destructive impulses and pushes me to change and move and grow. The Spirit creates dynamic energy between me and others, forcing me to consider something other than the same old same old, to open myself to people and concepts beyond what I would typically choose for myself. In a world where ideological lines are being drawn so sharply, the Spirit changes my angle of approach, to see and hear and feel the world from different perspectives. And because the Spirit is God and is of God, the Spirit grounds these new ways of being and acting and

responding in God's reconciling, invitational LOVE. As the old Spiritual says, "you've got to move when the Spirit says move" and at Pentecost we are jolted out of our silos and echo-chambers to consider things in new, healthy, expansive ways. In a 2021 characterized by entrenchment and widespread disrespect, I've got a big "Amen" to say to the unpredictable, upsetting, re-configuring activity of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Pentecost is a celebration of Diversity. The disciples were from Galilee. The witnesses to the ecstatic experience were people of Jerusalem, but with origins elsewhere. The Galileans suddenly speak other languages, the witnesses hear and recognize languages that they might not have heard in a long time; and while the initial response was a combination of disbelief and bemusement, hearing all these languages at this Spirit-filled moment says to us that any understanding of Church that pictures it as being of one language, one ethnicity, one skin colour, misses the point completely.

Here, we encounter a Holy intention for Diversity among those who walk the path of Jesus. Is this something we need to hear in 2021? Yes, it is. For those who regard the present emphasis on Diversity in many congregations and denominations on Diversity as nothing more than trendy or politically correct or "woke", I'll happily point back 2000 years and say that embracing Diversity in Christian circles is foundational, even "traditional"! When we compartmentalize ourselves and judge those who are outside our little domain, we miss the fullness of the will of God.

And yet... point three... Pentecost also reminds us that right from the start, Christianity has been marked by human brokenness. Let's have a look at a map, of the locations identified by the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts: Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya/Cyrene, Rome, Crete, Arabia. When I hear this list each Pentecost, which describes itself as a listing of "every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5) I figure well, fair enough: this would have been the "known world" at that time and place.

But it wasn't. At the time of this scene in the book of Acts, Rome was in charge but the culture is more often described as Greek or "Hellenistic," and there seems to have been some common ground – at least in intellectual circles – in how one viewed the world. There were Greeks, there were Jews, and then there were "others". Intellectually at least, there was a degree of respect between the Jews and Greeks, but that respect was not extended to that broad category of "others", referred to by the Greek word BARBAROI... or our English word, BARBARIANS. The name Barbaroi was intended as an insult: while Greek and Jewish intellectuals recognized the philosophical and theological abilities of one another, their common opinion was that the Barbaroi couldn't even put syllables together, let alone thoughts. Their language sounded like blah-blah-blah, or like a child playing with their lips, and they were summarily dismissed.

I mention this, because as we look at this map of the Mediterranean, we can be confident that this was not "the known world" at the time. They would have known full well there were others beyond these limits. But those others, were barbaroi, whose existence didn't even warrant a mention. If there were barbaroi living in Jerusalem, who cared? They were just too far outside, too different, and clearly regarded as "not good enough".

By my estimation, then, it would be fanciful to say that the first Christian Pentecost, inclusive as it was, was without boundaries. Even then, there was a point where different-but-similar dissolves into “too different”. And knowing that this tendency goes way back, makes me question our experience now, of determining which of those regarded as “other” are accorded respect and which are treated with contempt. Whether it’s folks from the other side of the track, rivals from the next community, blue collar vs white collar, heteronormative vs queer, Protestant vs Catholic, Israeli vs Palestinian, we live with labels and isolation and judgment and violence... and so, it would appear, did the earliest believers.

I bring this up to make a point: that if we seek some previous “golden era” of history, we will never find a time that was “unbiased.” One of the first things we were taught in Seminary, is that every human being has a bias – their own personality, their own experiences, their own community or family training, their own moral and ethical codes, their own opinions. No human comes without these things; “unbiased” does not exist. So in the absence of “unbiased” we do the hard work of naming the things that fairly or unfairly shape our approach to the world, and seek the assistance of the Holy Spirit in recognizing, respecting and considering other ways, other angles, other backgrounds. We invite the Spirit to help us to honour the personhood of others, even as we recognize the filters that impact our experience of the world. And to me, the incomplete list of that first Pentecost, helps encourage me to keep doing the work, to keep learning what triggers me, what repels me, what moves me directly to judgmental anger. That’s not to say I exit all moral or ethical determinations, but I temper them with a humble acknowledgment of my own human imperfection. Pentecost, in reminding me of the labelling and judging that is found even in Biblical texts, encourages me to invite the wisdom and breadth of the Spirit to blow me around a bit, overturn my furniture, jangle the positioning of things that I prefer to be “just so.”

Pentecost is all these things and more. A welcoming of Spirit. A celebration of Diversity. An acknowledgement of the human tendency to build fences rather than bridges. May this festival, ancient yet so very contemporary, upset things that need upsetting in my life, in your lives, and in our life in Christ. Amen.

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