

Sermon for Pentecost A
Sunday, May 28, 2023
“Experience Pentecost”

Texts: Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3-13; John 20:19-23

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On the day of Pentecost, Jerusalem was bursting with holy energy! You see, fifty days after Passover comes the Jewish festival of Shavu’ot. According to the Book of Leviticus, there was to be a festival of the first fruits the day after seven Sabbaths had passed. 7 weeks = 49 days + 1 day = 50 days. That is the day of Shavu’ot, or the Festival of Weeks. People had come to Jerusalem from all over the known world to celebrate the Festival of Weeks. In Koine Greek, which was spoken during the time of Jesus and the first apostles, Shavu’ot was called ‘*pentecostē*’, which means fifty. Our celebration Pentecost has its origins in that festival. And from among that gathering of devout Jews, the Holy Spirit descended upon them; they heard a message from God each in their own language:

“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs— in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

On that day, people from diverse cultures and languages heard and understood a universal message. I imagine the Pentecost moment to have been as though I were speaking to you in Cherokee, but you heard it in whatever your native tongue was. Or imagine being in a room full of people all speaking a different language, but you heard and understood everyone else in your own language. That’s the miracle of Pentecost. Where God had confused the language of humans at the Tower of Babel, he made humans comprehend each other at Pentecost.

Often Christians treat Pentecost as the day that the Holy Spirit was given to humankind for the first time, but God’s spirit has always been present. It was present at creation when his spirit moved across the waters, it was with the seventy elders when Moses called them into service, as we heard in today’s lesson from Numbers, it appeared in several other places in the Bible before the Day of Pentecost. The Day of Pentecost represents the final manifestation of the fullness of God in God’s three natures, as told to us in scripture. And the Holy Spirit continues to be revealed even in our own time through people doing God’s work.

Christ’s presence on earth gave to humanity a renewed understanding of what our relationship is between us and God the Creator, and how that translates into our relationships with each other. God’s manifestation in Christ is about relationship, but

God's manifestation by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is about experience. It is through our experience of God that God is made real to us.

Many Christian traditions share their experience of the Holy Spirit with outward bodily expression and lively expression: the lifting up of hands, speaking in tongues, shouting, energetic music, clapping, and the like. We Episcopalians and those in other catholic traditions like ours show our experience of the Holy Spirit in the ways that the Holy Spirit changes and transforms ordinary things and people. That is the essence of our sacramental life. We are sacramental churches. When the Holy Spirit comes among us, ordinary bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist, and we are spiritually renewed and regenerated. When the Holy Spirit comes among us, ordinary women and men are ontologically changed at Ordination into vessels for God, proclaimers of the gospel, and stewards of the sacraments. When the Holy Spirit comes among us, we are inspired to renew our commitment to God at Confirmation. When the Holy Spirit comes among us, our mistakes are forgiven in the Sacrament of Confession and our relationship with God is restored. When the Holy Spirit comes among us, two persons who love each other become one in marriage and together manifest the love of God. When the Holy Spirit comes among us, ordinary oil is transformed into a balm that brings healing to our sick, broken, and battered bodies, minds, and spirits. And when the Holy Spirit comes among us, ordinary water is transformed into the wellspring of life, which is poured over us at Baptism, makes us members of the body of Christ, gives us a new identity as children of God, and guarantees us the inheritance of eternal salvation.

Our entire sacramental life springs from the waters of baptism, and is connected along a straight path from the font to the altar. When we baptize infants and young children, we welcome them into the Christian family, and we make promises to teach our faith and our traditions to them as they grow, until they are old enough to make that commitment for themselves at Confirmation. When we baptize adults, they make those promises for themselves. When we administer the Sacrament of Baptism, we ask the Holy Spirit to come among us and transform the catechumen into a new creature. He/she takes on a new identity as a member of the Body of Christ, and inherits the guarantee of salvation.

Pentecost marks the end of the Great Fifty Days of Easter. We change the liturgical colors, we stop saying Alleluia as much, but Pentecost isn't the end of the story. It is, in fact, the beginning. It is the beginning of the Christian story that we have been commanded by Jesus Christ himself to tell and share the experience of the transcendent God among us and to share the message of love, respect, and renewal that he brought to us. Pentecost is about an experience—how we experience God in our lives, how he moves us and transforms us.

Today's lectionary provides a couple options. There was an alternative Gospel reading and there was an epistle reading, which we did not read today, but I would like for you to hear what it says:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

We all have gifts that we are supposed to use to share our experience of God. Each of us has been given unique gifts to do God's purpose for us in the world. Perhaps you know what your gifts are; perhaps, you've figured out what your purpose is. But most of us go around wondering—and wandering—about what our purpose is. If you're not sure about God's purpose for your life or what your unique gifts are, think about the things that excite you, the things you enjoy doing, because somewhere lurking within your passions are your best gifts for serving God in the world. You're probably already fulfilling God's mission for you and you don't even know it, so ask him. Pray for your purpose to be made known to you. At every point in our lives, God has need of us.

And God has already given you the tools and skills you need to fulfil your mission at this time. Yesterday, during our Saturday bible study that we do in Spanish, I had a new revelation. As I read the Gospel and the story of Pentecost from Acts, I realized that the Holy Spirit was imparted upon the apostles twice: once on the day of the Resurrection, which was in our gospel lesson, and again on the Day of Pentecost. They were given a double-portion. It reminded me of the story of Elijah and Elisha from the Old Testament, when Elisha asked for a double-portion of Elijah's spirit before he took over for Elijah after he departed. God gave the apostles a double-portion of his spirit to embolden them to face the challenges ahead, to endure the persecution and the martyrdom that most of them faced as they spread the good news of Jesus Christ. God gives each of us that same portion of his spirit to do the work he has called us to do.

Pentecost is about how we can use our gifts and share our experience of God to go out and transform the world. Life is so full of uncertainty, change, and chaos. Sometimes we may think we have it all in control, but we really don't. Sometimes we

may think that others are in control, and they may be for a time, but in the end, they aren't. Ultimately, God is in control and he wants his creation to live in the beauty of his kingdom and to trust him in his faithfulness and love.

Pentecost reminds us that God is always present with us and helps to re-energize us to share that wonderful message with the world. Just as Jesus commissioned his followers to spread his message to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, we are to do the same, sharing our experience of God with others to offer hope, encouragement, and to testify to how fulfilling it is to know God as revealed in Jesus the Christ. Even though today marks the end of the liturgical Easter season, we must not stop proclaiming that Jesus Christ is risen and that we have seen the Lord. Alleluia! Amen.