

The Day of Pentecost (Whitsunday)
June 4, 2017
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Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 104:25-35, 37
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
John 20:19-23

“When the day of Pentecost had come ...”

It seems, perhaps, just an incidental detail, but it’s worth our noting that the feast day already had a name. Before it became a day we sometimes call “the birthday of the Church,” Pentecost was a Jewish holy day. In modern Judaism it’s still celebrated as a major festival called *Shavuot*.

This Jewish holy day has undoubtedly changed in 2,000 years, but now (as then) it’s an extension of Passover. The root of Pentecost is “pente” – meaning 50. On the 50th day after Passover, the people made a holy pilgrimage to Jerusalem to give thanks to the God who was the ultimate provider and authority for them. Even under Roman rule, Jews celebrated their freedom at Passover.

The celebration of Pentecost that followed 50 days later was a celebration of the first spring harvest, a gathering of people to give thanks for the blessings of food - food provided by a giving God to feed a freed people in a new land. And even under Roman rule, the people gathered in the streets, coming from all over the known world, to celebrate. But while the crowds had flooded the streets outside, the disciples were holed up.

Our reading from Acts doesn’t say why they were holed up, but we might guess. The gospel this morning isn’t actually a Pentecost story. It’s a story about what happened on the first day of Easter, not the 50th day after Passover. But it, too, describes the disciples as locked in, afraid that the Judean authorities (not the “Jews,” as our translation so badly puts it)... afraid that the authorities, in cahoots with the Romans, would arrest them and do whatever it took to eradicate this Jesus “movement” he had inspired.

That seems to be where we begin this morning. The disciples are afraid and holed up and holding back from the celebration of life going on all around them. And then the Holy Spirit comes upon them and sends them into that wild international festival out there.

Here in church today, we recall that first Pentecost not only with an opening prayer and that reading from Acts. We recall it a bit more vividly – with color and an invitation for everyone to get into the act. So I want to thank those of you, first of all, who wore red this morning to get into the “spirit” of the day. (Pun intended!)

And I especially want to thank those of you game enough to read a bit of that first reading in some language other than the English we usually hear here. According to the signup sheets, we might expect to hear as many as seven or eight different languages this morning: Spanish, French, German, Italian, possibly Hawai’i “pidgin,” Swedish, Latvian, and something I couldn’t quite decipher – perhaps “Gibberish”?

Admittedly, ours is a more modest reenactment of the languages than is described in Acts:

Amazed and astonished, [the people] asked, "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."

But even a smattering of languages makes for a rather remarkable experience this morning. And it gives us pause to try to imagine the linguistic extravaganza described for us in Acts.

So, I thank you – at least those of you game enough to give it a go – for helping out this morning, for being willing to play along. Not everyone was, you know. I don't say that to make a "thing" of it; it's simply something I observe – and have observed in other churches before. In spite of my cajoling, and in spite of my words of reassurance that nobody will be listening to discover if you say it right or not, and in spite of my pledge of support in helping find a translation for you, some of you decline.

You'll tell me you're too shy to speak in public, or that you're embarrassed at how badly you remember what little you once studied, or that it's been too long and you just don't remember it anymore or that you have no facility with languages.

I can appreciate some of the reasons for your reticence, some of your apprehensions. But if the linguistic challenge seemed like too much before, what I have to tell you now will likely be much more unnerving. Because if we were really to follow the pattern we hear in that reading from Acts, our next job will be to take this show on the road and do it all out there.

It's clear in that reading from Acts, after all, that the Spirit descends not just on some of the disciples, but on *each* of them. And it's not just a few of them who go out into the streets speaking other languages, it's *all* of them. And the implication that follows is that this is somehow our calling as well, that the Holy Spirit is given to *each* of us, and that we are, *all* of us, sent out to speak of God when we leave here and hit the streets with a mission.

The thing is, when it's next your turn to proclaim the Gospel, it may not be in a setting where you're surrounded by friends and family. And when it's next your turn to proclaim the Gospel, it won't be a time when your voice is lost in a cacophony of other voices doing the same sort of thing. And when it's next your turn to proclaim the Gospel, it is unlikely that you'll be given a lot of time to prepare your lines in advance. (And what's more, there won't be a script to follow, and you'll have to do your own translating.)

If what I had first asked you to do this morning seemed a bit daunting, something for which you were not prepared or equipped, you likely find this prospect all the more extraordinary.

If so, I do have one more observation to offer. And it just might make it all a bit easier for you. It comes from this morning's gospel. As I mentioned before, as John tells it, it's not the 50th day of Easter, but rather the very first day. And yet although it has nothing to do with the number 50, it is still a "Pentecost" story, a story of Jesus coming to the disciples, locked inside and afraid ... Jesus comes to them and breathes the Holy Spirit into them.

But first he greets them, saying, "Peace be with you." It must be more than nice words to say. In this moment, the word he speaks to them is somehow made flesh within them, and woven into the fabric of their being. Jesus intrudes into their fear and gives them peace.

And then he commissions them to do pretty much the same thing: "As God has sent me," he says to them, "so I send you" – and, by extension, he commissions us to do the same. As John frames it, Pentecost is God's way of working through us to share the peace we have been given.

Maybe that still seems a tall order, but at least Jesus boils it down to a single word, peace. And if that's the task, our work of translating might not seem quite so impossible; after all, all we have to do is translate that seemingly simple word, peace – *eirēne*, in Greek; *shalom*, in Hebrew; *salam*, in Arabic; *mir*, in Russian; *pace*, in Italian; *frieden*, in German.

We have a bit more work to do, all the same. This peace that Jesus offers is not merely polite society. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus first promised peace and the Holy Spirit. The peace he offered then was, as he put it, "not as the world gives" (John 14:27). In that moment, it was a peace that would allow him to stand firm and face into betrayal and his crucifixion.

This "peace" was clearly nothing as banal as making nice or trying not to ruffle anyone's feathers or avoiding a public disagreement. It has little, if anything to do with whatever it is that is swirling around us or besetting, and upsetting, us; it has just about everything to do with what goes on within us.

That's the peace Jesus promises, the kind of peace that allows us to stand firm in the midst of turmoil and even adversity. That's the kind of peace you and I need in our lives. (And it's the kind of peace that I, at least, too easily let go of and lose, the kind of peace I need to reclaim for myself.)

You might just possibly remember that Martin Luther King, Jr. once observed that "true peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." So peace might mean getting outside of our comfort zones in order to speak a word of peace to someone outside these walls, someone who needs to hear of God's love and good will for them, even someone who needs to hear us speak it in a language other than one we normally speak amongst our own circle of friends and family.

"When the day of Pentecost had come ..." Well, the day of Pentecost has come; this is the day of Pentecost.

This morning, as we celebrate another “birthday of the Church,” let us reclaim our birthright and our calling. And as we celebrate another birthday, it’s worth our asking if we’re still a lot like those first disciples, holed up and holding back, and pretty happy to be locked up within the seeming safety of this sanctuary on a Sunday. (It’s lovely here. It’s pretty cozy here.) And that’s why it’s worth our asking if the Spirit needs to come among us, enter into us with a word strengthens us with the resolve not to hole up or hold back.

Let us settle for nothing less than that peace beyond human understanding (as St. Paul himself once put it), that peace which allows us to be constant in the midst of chaos. Let us claim our birthright and live out our high calling. Our place is out there in the world, in the middle of chaos and in the middle of the international festival of life. Let us claim the gifts that have been given to us. Let us resolve to be the amazing and astonishing people God calls us to become. Let us breathe into ourselves the Spirit, that she might strengthen us to “persevere in resisting evil,” to “proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ,” to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves,” and to “strive for justice and peace among all peoples, and respect the dignity of every human being.”