

The Rev. Mary Haggerty
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021
Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come the disciples were all together in one place. *Acts 2:1*

When we hear the word Pentecost, we know this story. Oh yes, Pentecost, that's when we wear red; It's the birthday of the church; It's when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in the form of something like tongues of fire. Most of us can create that whole scene in our mind's eye.

But Pentecost did not begin with the disciples. The Feast of Weeks, Shavout, was celebrated by the Jewish people seven weeks, or 50 days after Passover. That's where the Greek speaking Jews got the name Pentecost, meaning 50 days. It was a pilgrimage feast when Jews from all over came to the temple in Jerusalem. The feast was originally a harvest festival, celebrating the end of the 7 weeks of the grain harvest with a presentation in the temple of the first fruits of the final harvest, which was the wheat. We read about it in the Book of Exodus, chapter 34: *You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the festival of ingathering at the turn of the year.*

The feast of weeks, or Pentecost, was also a time for Jews to recall what God had done for them as a people. The ancient Israelites arrived at Sinai about 50 days after Passover, so Pentecost also became the commemoration of God's giving the covenant to Israel at Sinai. In the book of Exodus, God's appearance at Sinai includes thunder and smoke. The scripture scholar Raymond Brown writes that one ancient writer "describes angels taking what God said to Moses on the mountaintop and carrying it out on tongues to the people on the plain below."¹ This morning's reading from the Acts of the Apostles clearly echoes the imagery from the Hebrew

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997. p. 283.

Scriptures with its mighty wind and its tongues as of fire. The colorful story we hear this morning, then, is a story of the renewal of God's covenant. God is once more, in a new way, calling a people to be God's own. Pentecost is not a new story. It is a continuation of God's covenant from the beginning of time to us today here in this church.

The Pentecost we hear about this morning in Acts draws in people from all corners of the Roman Empire, a mixture of nationalities, people who speak a variety of languages and observe a variety of cultural norms. Peter proclaims, as promised in the book of Joel, that God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh at this Pentecost moment. The Spirit of God blows in and shakes things up! The Spirit of God knows no boundaries. God cannot be kept at bay by the disciples. They proclaim from their spirit drenched hearts the Good news in such a way that everyone, this whole crazy mix of folks, can hear the words in their own language.

We are told that all can hear the words. But do they understand them? There are two reactions to the disciples' miraculous proclamation: One group was amazed and perplexed and asked, "What does this mean?" The other group sneered and said, "These guys are drunk on new wine!"

What is our reaction to this Good News that has become so familiar that it doesn't take us by surprise anymore? Are we willing to hear it again, to hear it in a new way? Are we willing to let the Holy Spirit blow through this place and ignite a new fire in us? Or are we going to be the skeptics who just can't believe that God wants us to be God's very own people, that God wants us to bring God's ways of love and justice and mercy to every encounter. Even when it's hard. Even when it doesn't make sense to other people. Even when we have no idea where it will lead.

The disciples didn't know where this would all lead. Jesus didn't leave them a blueprint for their next steps. He didn't found a church with explicit rules and unshakeable traditions. He

left them his Spirit and he asked them to go into the world and spread the Good news of God's love and faithfulness. And isn't that what God asks of us?

This morning, we will have a special blessing for John and Deb's 40th wedding anniversary. 40 years ago, they stepped out in faith and love to bring two families together. They had no idea what was ahead – the joys and sorrows, the funny stories the family still tells, the learning and growing they have all done from being family together. I'm sure there were times when they thought one or the other of them was "drunk on new wine!" And I'm also sure there were times when, together, they asked, "What does this all mean?" And they set about figuring it out, letting go of what needed letting go and allowing a fresh wind to blow through their lives. They stepped out in faith and let the Spirit of God walk alongside them through these years.

This is the Spirit the disciples encountered, the same Spirit that will blow through this place if we let her. This is the Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation and the paraclete that Jesus promises to send to his disciples. We have a whole host of names for the Holy Spirit, but I think Paraclete, strange as it sounds to our ears, is my favorite. It's a combination of the Greek words "para" or alongside, and "kletos" or to call. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come alongside us. We may not know just how or where God is leading us, but we have the promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit is walking side by side with us into our unknown future.

This Spirit of God will bring us comfort, and peace. AND the Spirit of God promises to shake things up, to blow through this place like a violent wind. This paraclete will come alongside side us to remind us that we are God's beloved people. If we allow her to, this Spirit will ignite in us the fire of God's love so intensely that we can't help but spread that love.

The day of Pentecost has come for us, too. Can we dare to ask what this means? Are we willing to open our hearts to the Spirit of Jesus and allow a fierce wind to blow through this

place? Can we believe that the fire of God rests upon us and burns over us? Can we allow the Spirit to speak through us a language that all who encounter us can understand? The language of love and hospitality, of mercy and justice, of hope and promise.

As God promised through the words of the prophet, Joel, so long ago, the Spirit of God will be poured out upon all flesh. And that Spirit will give us the ability to see visions and to dream dreams. Will we sneer at such nonsense? Or will we dare to ask, "What does this mean?"

Our day of Pentecost has come.