

Sunday, May 20, 2018
Day of Pentecost (Year B)
Acts 2.1-21; Romans 8.22-27
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If you could pick one Biblical event to personally witness, what would it be?

Of course, there's no right answer. There are so many to choose from. As a Christian, I would have to narrow my choice to the New Testament. But even then, there are just so many significant events.

Admittedly, it would be pretty amazing to have been present at the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Seeing the Son of God, seeing God Incarnate, being brought into the world.

It would have been amazing to have been present at Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan. To have witnessed the Spirit of God descend on Jesus in the form of a dove. To have heard God proclaim, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mk 1.11, Lk 3.22b). To experience the event that inaugurated Jesus' public ministry.

It would have been life-changing to have been present at the crucifixion. To have witnessed as the Son of God willingly went to his death for our sake – for my sake – to bring about the forgiveness of our sins, to bring about the salvation of the world.

Or it would have been awe-inspiring to have been present with Mary Magdalene or with the Eleven disciples when Jesus made his first post-resurrection appearance to them. To see first-hand the event that signaled the defeat of sin and death and the assurance of new and eternal life for all humanity.

The fact that I am asking this question on this particular day, the Feast of the Pentecost, probably tells you that I have my own personal bias. Any of the events I've mentioned, and many others, would have been absolutely amazing, awe-inspiring, life-changing to have experienced. And while each has its significance in the arc of salvation history, I don't think anything could compare with the mind-blowing, earth-shattering experience of the first Pentecost.

If nothing else, you can't beat the drama of the first Pentecost event. Image a room filled with Jesus' followers, unsure of what is to happen now that Jesus is gone – now that he has ascended into heaven. Many of them are probably ready to pack it in and return to the lives they had before Jesus came on the scene. He had told them they are to continue his work. But how are they to do that? Who is going to lead them? Who could possibly motivate them, inspire them, guide them, the way Jesus had?

When suddenly, total chaos erupts! "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled

with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2.xx). Probably the best special effects in the entire Bible. Other than the beginning of creation in Genesis.

The energy in the room would have been palpable. It would have been intense. Wind. Fire. A cacophony of voices praising God in every language imaginable. And yet, every word intelligible and understood. At first those present would have been startled. Shocked. Even scared. But at the same time, it seems so right. So natural. The shock and fear turn to exhilaration, to joy, as they one-by-one realize what is happening. This is what they’ve been waiting for! Now it all makes sense! Jesus’ last words to them before his Ascension were “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8). This must be what he was talking about. It has to be! What else could it be? Finally, the Holy Spirit!

Who wouldn’t want to be part of this intense experience? This pouring out of the Holy Spirit as an abundant gift on and for all believers?

And perhaps more to the point, aside from the frenetic activity, the dramatic special effects of the Holy Spirit appearing on the scene, there is a significant theological point in the Pentecost event. A point succinctly summed up by – of all people, a former CIA operative – Robert Baer, who observed, “Bethlehem was God with us, Calvary was God for us, and Pentecost is God in us.”

Jesus’ birth was significant because it was the act whereby God himself came to be with us, to live among us and to experience life as we do. The crucifixion was important because it demonstrated God’s greatest act of love for us. That God allowed the sacrifice of his only Son so that sin and death might be defeated, so that we might benefit from this sacrifice and gain salvation and eternal life. Yet both those events entailed the bodily presence of Jesus. What about the time after? The time following Jesus’ Resurrection and Ascension? Christ dying for us and giving us new life is an amazing gift. Absolutely awesome! But all of that is meaningless if there is not a means of sharing that Good News. All of that is meaningless if there is not a way for the work of God’s love to continue in the world following Jesus’ Ascension.

For that to happen, there needed to be a new Body of Christ. A body comprised of his followers. And to bring that body together, to energize and guide that body, Christ sent his Holy Spirit, just as he told his disciples he would. This is what all of salvation history has been working toward. Not the crucifixion. Not the Resurrection. These were just steps in the process. What salvation history has been working toward, leading to, is Pentecost.

Paul tells us in our reading from Romans, “the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom 8.22). The labor pains of a new birth, the re-creating of the cosmos in light of the Resurrection event. We see clues of this in the Pentecost event itself. The Holy Spirit coming on the scene like the rush of wind. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, wind and Spirit are the same word. *Ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. And both *ruach* and *pneuma* share another meaning with wind and Spirit. Breath. In Genesis we hear how “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1.2) at the

creation of the world. And how when God formed man he “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen 2.7). All of these – wind, breath, the Holy Spirit, blowing through the arc of history, from the beginning of creation to Pentecost. As we see in the Pentecost event, the wind of God, the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, comes to bring new life. The Spirit breathes life into this newly forming community of believers. And the wind of God, the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, doesn’t just stop with the formation of the Pentecost community, which became the Church.

What the events of Pentecost show us is that in addition to being a communal event, Pentecost is an event that affects us individually. It’s all right there in that first Pentecost. Remember that each of those in attendance were filled with the Holy Spirit, resting on them as tongues of fire. And that each began praising God in their own language. The Holy Spirit did not impose a universal language on the believers so that they all spoke in one tongue, as one voice. No, the Spirit honors and values the uniqueness of the individual. God, through the Spirit, breaks into our lives in unexpected ways, sometimes uninvited. Through the Spirit, God speaks to each of us where we are, on a personal level. The Spirit uses our individuality, the uniqueness of who we are, for God’s own purposes. For the purposes of continuing the work of Christ. For the purposes of proclaiming the Good News of the Resurrection. As Jesus commanded, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

All of this, the re-birthing of Creation that Paul talks about, requires the individual. The individual energized by the Holy Spirit. At the Pentecost event, Peter equated what was happening with ancient prophecy, “God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2.17). With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Church and each of us are called to live into these ancient promises. To live into the re-birth of the entire Creation. That through us, energized by the Holy Spirit, God’s vision for that new Creation will be brought to fruition.

The work of the Holy Spirit did not end with the Pentecost event. It continues on, in the life and ministry of the Church. In the life and ministry of this parish community. In the life and ministry of each and every one of you. And today, the Holy Spirit is again at work, adding to the strength and diversity and uniqueness of this community. This morning we will baptize Charlotte Jo Kuchinad as the newest member of the Body of Christ. In so doing, she will join us in our sacred calling, energized and guided by the Holy Spirit, to help breathe new life into the world. For Pentecost, then and now, is God in us.

Come, Holy Spirit, Come!