

Sunday, May 31, 2020

Pentecost (Year A)

Acts 2.1-21; John 20.19-23

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/257624072252342/>

(Sermon begins at about 15:00)

“Receive the Holy Spirit”

Our first reading, from the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, presents the iconic image of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Namely, that the Holy Spirit arrived amongst a crowded assembly of the disciples and numerous other people from Jerusalem, where the disciples were staying. We are told that the Holy Spirit arrived with a sound like the rush of a violent wind. Following this, tongues of fire appeared over the heads of those present, indicating that each had received and been filled with the Holy Spirit. As a sign of this, they all began to speak in other languages. In response to some ridicule from skeptics—“They are filled with new wine”—Peter addresses the assembly, quoting the Prophet Joel. About how it was foretold that God will pour out his Spirit upon all people, with the result being that many will prophesy: sons and daughters, men and women, slave and free. And that the old will see visions and the young will dream dreams.

This is the image that we usually think of on this day. The image that we celebrate by wearing red and decorating the church with red streamers or with images of flames. This is the scene we attempt to reenact by reading the Gospel in multiple languages—either separately, or as we have done the last couple of years, all at once, creating a cacophony of sound that resembles that first Pentecost—the numerous voices speaking different languages, even resembling the sound of the rush of a violent wind. This is the image that we seek to recreate, on which we focus our attention. This is the imagery that is most often the focus of sermons on this day. But that is not where I’m going to go today.

Before I move on, I do need to make a comment about the Feast of Pentecost. As we know, the Holy Spirit arrives on Pentecost, which is 50 days after Easter. But the original meaning of Pentecost has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit. Just to be clear, the term Pentecost comes from the Greek meaning “fiftieth,” referring to the Jewish festival celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover, also known as the “Feast of Weeks” and the “Feast of 50 days”—a festival celebrating the first fruits of the harvest. This is certainly an appropriate day for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The harvest providing physical nourishment and sustenance. The Holy Spirit providing spiritual nourishment and sustenance.

But there is another version of the imparting of the Holy Spirit—the version we heard in today’s Gospel—that we only hear once every three years in our lectionary cycle. While the events of this alternate version do not occur on the Feast of Pentecost, it is included in the readings for Pentecost precisely because it deals with the imparting of the Holy Spirit. This alternate version that we hear in John’s Gospel comes at another time, although equally appropriate. In John’s telling, the Holy Spirit is given not 50 days after Easter, but on Easter Day itself. On the evening

of Easter Day, to be precise. That morning, Mary Magdalene had discovered the tomb empty and had her encounter with the Risen Christ. And then that evening, the Risen Christ appears to the disciples who are gathered together, still locked away in fear. To be clear, he appeared to all the disciples minus Thomas. In fact, you will recognize this account as the beginning of the story of “Doubting Thomas” that we heard on the Sunday after Easter. In this scene, there is no large assembly, as was present in the Acts account of Pentecost. This scene is far more personal, far more intimate.

On that Easter evening, the Risen Lord appears to the disciples. He says to them, “Peace be with you.” After some apparent uncertainty on the part of the disciples, Jesus shows them his wounds. They then recognize him and rejoice. Again, Jesus says to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This was a commissioning. That God had sent Jesus into the world for a particular purpose. And even though he may be dead physically, the work continues. And they were now being sent out to continue that work. To continue the work of revealing the love of God to the world through their words and in their actions. To proclaim the message of the Gospel—to love God and to love others.

“When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’ There it is. The imparting of the Holy Spirit. No big fanfare. No sound like the rush of a violent wind. No tongues of fire. No speaking in other languages. Just the simple act of breathing on them. Quite appropriate, actually. For in both the Hebrew language of the disciples and the Greek in which John’s Gospel was written, breath and spirit are the same word. *Ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek. The intimate connection between breath and spirit. This breathing the Spirit into the disciples calls to mind another act of the Divine. Just as at the creation of humanity “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen 2.7). Breath imparting life.

If breath gives life, and if breath and spirit are intimately connected—Divine breath and Divine spirit intimately connected—then Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples was breathing new life into them. The new life to which they were being called, for which they were being sent. The Spirit that was what they needed to fulfil Jesus’ commission to them. The Spirit being that which would invigorate them, guide them, nourish them, sustain them, as they continued the work of Christ. The Spirit that would become a part of their very beings. The Spirit that, as Jesus told them on the night before his death, he would send to be a guide, a source of comfort, a source of inspiration. That same Spirit now dwelling within them. The Spirit that would be the ongoing presence of Jesus in their lives and in the Christian community. The ongoing presence of Christ that has been passed down throughout history, that has been given to every person who has been baptized into the Body of Christ. The Spirit, the ongoing presence of Christ that has enlivened and enabled the Body of Christ to continue throughout the ages, to continue the mission and ministry of Christ. The Spirit, the ongoing presence of Christ that has been given to and dwells within each of us. Think about that for a moment. Let that sink in.

How important is this indwelling Spirit, particularly at such a time as we are experiencing as a nation? At a time when there is civil unrest, protesting the death of George Floyd, protesting police brutality, protesting systemic racism. How in need we are of that same Spirit, dwelling within each of us, to help us recognize that we are all beloved children of God. That we are all

sisters and brothers. That we are all made in the image and likeness of God. That we are called to love one another as Christ loves each and every one of us. That we are called to proclaim Christ's message of love over hate, of light over darkness, of justice over injustice. That is why, whenever we renew our baptismal vows, as we will do in a few moments, we are asked, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" And we respond "I will, with God's help." We will, with the help of the Holy Spirit, given to us as God's, as Christ's, ongoing presence in our lives; in our very beings. That is why the Spirit was given to us.

Not to discount what we hear in the Acts of the Apostles, but the Gospel account of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into his disciples, at least to me, is far more meaningful, far more personal, far more intimate. It's not the Holy Spirit blowing through a large crowd, alighting on anyone who happened to get in the way. No, here, Jesus directly gives the breath of the Spirit, the breath of new life, from his mouth to ours. Providing that direct connection with him. Providing more of a cherished gift than a mass outpouring.

In this time of Safer at Home orders and social distancing, the more intimate version of the imparting of the Holy Spirit conveyed in John's Gospel just seems more appropriate than the version we hear in Acts. It's almost as if John's version was the socially distanced version, with the disciples sheltering in place. And yet, the Holy Spirit comes to them, even when they are sheltered away. A reminder that the Holy Spirit continues to come to us, to be with us, even as we are sheltered away.

Personally, I take great comfort in that imagery, in that knowledge. Particularly during uncertain times, with things changing day-by-day, sometimes minute-by-minute. Knowing that the Holy Spirit, Christ's ongoing presence, is with me to help me weather whatever happens next. To help guide me in whatever happens next. Providing a constant source of strength and comfort and nurture in the midst of the uncertainties of this time in which we find ourselves.

I also find comfort in the fact that Jesus did not give the Holy Spirit to his disciples so that they, or the Spirit, just sit idly by. He gave them the Spirit in response to his commissioning: "As my Father has sent me, so I send you." Which means we will not always be sitting idly by. Jesus' commissioning is also a promise. That we will one day be sent forth to continue the work he created us and calls us and sends us into the world to do. That we will get through this time with the help of his presence, with the help of the Holy Spirit. And that, nurtured by that same presence, that same Spirit, we will be ready to be sent forth once again. And when that time comes, watch out! Because when the time does come, the Holy Spirit will kick into overdrive—as in the Acts story—sending us forth with the rush of a mighty wind, burning with the fire of God's love, to proclaim the Gospel anew.