

Sunday, May 23, 2021

Day of Pentecost (Year B)

Acts 2.1-21; Romans 8.22-27

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/331530898483245>

(Sermon begins at about 24:30)

“Our Potential in the Holy Spirit”

The event we celebrate today—the coming of the Holy Spirit—hardly needs any explanation. It’s all laid out there in the second chapter of Acts. Well, maybe a little backstory is needed as to why the disciples were all gathered in one spot. They were gathered to celebrate the Jewish Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot—the ancient harvest festival that happens fifty days after the Passover. Hence the other name for this day—the name that we know—Pentecost, which means fiftieth day. A celebration that had, over time also taken on additional meaning: the commemoration of God giving the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. So, while we are not specifically told as such, the day would have already been filled with celebration, even if nothing else, nothing extraordinary, happened. There is that humorous little quip that “they are filled with new wine” (Acts 2.13). Being a harvest festival, which apparently could get pretty lively, it is entirely possible.

But, as we are told, that was not the case. Rather, something extraordinary was happening. We are given vivid detail that paints a picture of that glorious day. “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 2.2-4). Violent wind. Tongues of fire. A cacophony of languages. Sounds like absolute chaos.

This is how the church began. For the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is often considered the birthday of the Church. Not with the measured breathing and intermittent cries of labor pains and grunts and groans that accompany pushing the baby out the birth canal. Rather, this happened with explosive force. Less like the birth of a child and more like a big bang. Which, I supposed, is an appropriate image for the birth of the Church. Just as the universe started with the Big Bang and then began its rapid outward expansion, so too did the Church begin with the big bang of the coming of the Holy Spirit, followed by its rapid expansion into the known world.

While what is presented in Acts is certainly a dramatic beginning to the Church, it is very much like the Big Bang at the start of the universe in that it happened and is something that will never be repeated. It is important to know how we came to be. It is important in explaining how we got to where we are. But it is also important to recognize that we live in the aftermath of that event. What we do is only made possible by what happened in that event and what followed. Just as our galaxy, our solar system, our planet, our very lives, are products of the Big Bang, so too are our lives of faith products of the first Pentecost event. Just as our physical lives are only

made possible by the effects of the Big Bang, our spiritual lives are only made possible by the effects of Pentecost. By the imparting of the Holy Spirit.

We believe that the Holy Spirit was sent to be God's ongoing presence in our lives. In his Farewell Discourse, Jesus tells his disciples "I will not leave you orphaned" (Jn 14.18). He tells them, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate (or Helper), to be with you forever" (Jn 14.16). And a little later he explains, "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14.26). This Holy Spirit has the expressly stated purpose of being an ongoing presence in our lives. To be God's and Jesus' ongoing presence with us, to guide us, to nurture us, to sustain us, to motivate us, in our lives of faith. But the Holy Spirit does not come to each of us with the same extravagance as that first Pentecost event. I suppose she could, but if that were the case, we would be having rushes of wind and tongues of fire all over the place. And as a result, such events would become commonplace, ceasing to be extraordinary.

Once the Holy Spirit made her public entry into the world on that first Pentecost, the way that the Spirit is manifest in each of us is a little more subdued, a little more intimate. This is what Paul is talking about in our reading from his letter to the Romans. He starts off with a more global statement: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we await adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8.22-23). This is a powerful statement, directly connecting us to the arc of salvation history. Often in the New Testament, the image of childbirth refers to the coming of the Messiah. Of course, as Paul writes these words, the Messiah has already come. But his statement implies that the coming of the Messiah had been part of God's plans from the beginning of creation. Creation, including humanity, waited in anticipation of that event. That is really what the whole story of the Old Testament was about—humanity anticipating the coming of God's anointed who would redeem the people. Of course, that came through the birth of Jesus. That came through his life, his death, his Resurrection. That came through the promise he made to all who follow him that we shall be heirs with him to eternal life in God's Kingdom. Living into that is our part to play in salvation history, which is its own process, its own journey. It is why we are here in this time and space.

Not only is creation groaning in labor pains in anticipation of our new life in Christ. God also waits in anticipation during this process. The image of labor pains calls to mind an expectant mother eagerly awaiting the birth of her new infant. The longing to hold that new life in her hands. And so it is with God when it comes to each of us. God, eagerly awaiting, anticipating, the new life that God has in store for each of us. And like a new mother wanting to provide for our needs, so too does God wish to give us what we need to thrive, to have full and rich lives of faith.

And we certainly have our own labor pains to go through as we are birthed into the fullness of who God created us to be. For while we all have been called into the life of faith, to follow Christ, and to live into the Gospel, what that looks like is different for each of us. How we as individuals are birthed into our new lives of faith is as unique as we are. For that birthing into who God has created us and called us to be, we need help. We need a midwife to guide us in

becoming who we are created and called to be. As we continually seek to live into the Kingdom of God, we need a guide to show us the way. We need inspiration and motivation to help keep us on the path. We need a guide to lead us back when we wander off the path. And throughout, we need constant nurturing in our lives of faith.

That is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit working in us in ways that are unique to each of us. Paul puts this in terms of prayer: “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8.26). Here Paul is talking about more than just prayer. He is talking about what prayer represents. Relationship with God. Our ongoing interaction with God. Our continual seeking to discern God’s will. Our efforts to hear God’s voice speaking to us, guiding us. The Spirit provides that direct connection with God. After all, the Spirit is God. God touching our individual lives. God dwelling within us. God being with us at all times as our constant companion.

Sure, the Holy Spirit may have burst on the scene with a big bang on that first Pentecost 2,000 years ago. But just because we have not seen anything like that since does not mean that the Spirit is any less active. That creative and life-giving energy that is the Spirit continues to spread out through space and time, embracing each of us and connecting us to that original event. Allowing us to draw on the Divine energy that makes the work we do in and through this place, that makes the work we do in our individual and collective ministries, possible.

Emphasis on “possible.” Because I don’t think we fully realize the potential we have. I don’t think we fully realize what we could accomplish if we truly tapped into that Divine energy that is the Holy Spirit.

I am reminded of a wonderfully provocative quote by Annie Dillard in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear straw hats and velvet to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.

A tantalizing image of the awesome potential we have if we take all this church stuff seriously. Of what we could do if we truly allowed the Spirit to guide us into the living of the Gospel.

As we celebrate this Day of Pentecost, with the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit, let us also celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit into our individual lives and into our community of faith. Maybe not in as dramatic a way as with rush of violent winds or tongues of fire or a cacophony of languages. But when you combine the energy and influence the Spirit has shown in your life and my life and in the lives of countless individuals she has touched, the potential is unlimited. May we have the courage, individually and as a parish, to live into that potential.