

**Sunday, May 28, 2023**  
**Day of Pentecost (Year A)**  
Acts 2.1-1-21; John 20.19.23  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*  
*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1476735673083830>

*(Sermon begins at about 20:40)*

### **“Come, Holy Spirit, Come”**

In our Bible Study this past Thursday, someone commented that it is interesting how sometimes you read a passage in scripture, one you’ve read many times before, and yet see something new, something you’d never noticed before. I have certainly found this to be true, since in my work I continually am reading and re-reading passages of scripture, either as part of sermon preparation, Bible Study, the Daily Office, or other projects. And today’s readings are no different. Sort of.

You might have noticed that in our readings for today, we have two accounts of the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit. The first being from the Acts of the Apostles—what is considered the definitive account of the Pentecost event and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And the second being from the Gospel according to John, which occurs on the evening of Easter—a full fifty days before the event in Acts. Let’s quickly recap.

In the quintessential Pentecost story from Acts, the disciples are gathered to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost. No, Pentecost is not a uniquely Christian celebration. For the Jews, the feast of Pentecost, more commonly called Shavuot, or the Festival of Weeks, occurs fifty days after the Passover (Pentecost literally means “fiftieth”). This was initially a harvest celebration. Although, over time, it also came to be a celebration of the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. This being the case, Jerusalem was filled with devout Jews who had come to celebrate. It was during this very public time of celebration that the Holy Spirit makes her appearance. As we are told, this was a dramatic event: “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.” Obviously a raucous, chaotic event. The violent rushing of wind. Tongues of fire resting on all present, and yet not burning them; not unlike Moses encountering God in the burning bush, in which the bush was blazing and yet not consumed. And the cacophony of voices as people from all over the known world spoke in their own languages and yet, all were able to understand one another. A stark reversal from the story of the Tower of Babel. In many ways, a complete upheaval, even a reversal, of what the people had known before. Such tumultuous and frenetic activity, unlike anything that had ever happened, that some onlookers even thought those present were drunk, even though it was only nine in the morning.

On top of this, Peter, obviously filled with the Spirit, makes an impassioned speech, in which he references an ancient oracle first delivered by the Prophet Joel. When during a time of great calamity in the history of Israel, God brought a reversal, transforming curse into blessing.

Foretelling a time of God's judgment, in which all would be called to return to God. A restoration that would be accompanied by the outpouring of God's Spirit on the people. Resulting in a renewal of spiritual life and faith among the people, with oracles, dreams, and visions being available to all, regardless of age, gender, or social status. In short, that this coming of the Holy Spirit was the fulfilling of God's ancient promise to the people to bring about renewal and new life for all.

That's the official story of the first Pentecost. Or rather, the first Christian Pentecost; the Jewish festival being reframed with a new focus on the coming of the Holy Spirit. Not unlike how the Jewish celebration of Passover was reframed as the Christian celebration of Easter. But, as we see in the Gospel according to John, there was another recorded account of the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit. This occurrence being much more subdued. This is another account that we actually hear every year, in addition to Pentecost, on the Sunday after Easter. Only, typically we focus on "Doubting Thomas" and tend to overlook the part about the Holy Spirit. This encounter occurs on Easter evening, when Jesus appears to ten of the remaining eleven disciples hiding out for fear of the authorities. When the Risen Christ makes his first appearance to the disciples, "he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" That's it. No fanfare, no violent rushes of wind, no tongues of fire, no speaking in other languages. Just the quiet imparting of the Spirit on the disciples, as Jesus had promised them before his death. Just a quiet occurrence that was little more than a parenthetical comment, a footnote, in the story of Christ's resurrection.

Clearly, these two accounts differ significantly, in every detail. The only detail in common is the disciples, gathered together, receive the Holy Spirit.

Now, I will note that I am not so oblivious that I had never noticed the existence of differing accounts of the coming of the Holy Spirit. In fact, every year when I read the story of Doubting Thomas on the Sunday after Easter, I notice the almost passing comment about Jesus breathing on the disciples and giving them the Holy Spirit. And I always think how odd it is, and contradictory to, the story in Acts. Yet, this year, the two accounts standing in stark contrast is somehow more obvious than at other times.

This stark contrast naturally raises the question, which is it? Did Jesus really give the disciples the Holy Spirit on Easter? And if so, why do none of the other Gospels record such a significant occurrence? If they did receive the Holy Spirit on Easter, then why the need for the Pentecost event? Unless the disciples received the Holy Spirit privately and then Pentecost was the public event for everyone else? Of course, we cannot know the answers to these questions. So what do we make of these seeming inconsistencies, with these seeming contradictions?

Truth be told, I don't know that the stories are mutually exclusive or particularly in conflict. If anything, perhaps the different stories, with wildly different timeframes and details, says something about how the Holy Spirit really operates. How she really makes herself known. After all, if there is anything that we can glean from the existence of two seemingly different accounts it is that the coming of the Holy Spirit is not a "one and done" event. We see from Scripture, and we know from the lives of the saints and even from our own experiences, that the Holy Spirit can and does come at different times throughout our lives. That, regardless of

when the Holy Spirit first officially arrived, the receiving of the Holy Spirit is an ongoing event in the lives of the Church and its people. That the Holy Spirit is the ongoing presence of God and of Christ in our lives of faith. That was Jesus' promise to his disciples before his death. That he would not abandon them. That he would send his Spirit to be with them as a companion and guide. Which certainly implies an ongoing presence in our lives—whether or not we are able to recognize it at any given moment. That we can trust that the Spirit is with us, loving us, guiding us, comforting us, inspiring us, in our daily lives and ministries. And will come to the fore just when we need what only the Spirit can provide.

And if there is anything we can glean from the “official account” of Pentecost, it is that the Holy Spirit is wild and unpredictable. That the Holy Spirit comes not only whenever, but also however is needed at the time. As we see in the Gospel according to John, in the difficult period following Jesus' death, the Holy Spirit was imparted by the Risen Christ in a very gentle way, almost like blowing a kiss. A subtle, but effective, conveyance of what was needed. But then, at the “big reveal” on the Day of Pentecost, a more blustery, outrageous show was needed. As a way of conveying the awesome power of the Spirit in the lives of the people. Done in a way that most certainly grabbed the attention of those present, as well as onlookers. No question there about what God was doing. And here again, we see this in the lives of the saints throughout history and in our own experiences. Sometimes, the Spirit comes to us in very subtle, gentle ways. Sometimes so subtle we might not even be aware in the moment, but only upon deeper reflection. And other times, the Spirit might come to us in far more dramatic ways, hitting us like a ton of bricks. All depending on where we are and what we need in the moment.

Of course, the Spirit does not just operate in our individual lives. We also experience the Holy Spirit operating in the collective life of the Church—as a whole or in individual communities. At a recent meeting of my clergy group, Father Dean Farrar (known to many of you) included this quote in a paper he presented: “Evangelicals have held that the Church is a divine creation and that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church recreates it in the succession of generations dying and being reborn.” Which speaks to the fact that the Holy Spirit has an active role in the lives of our congregations. In the “dying and being reborn,” in the ebbs and flows that are a natural part of parish life. When I heard this, I immediately thought of how this applies to St. Gregory's and to the individual lives of our parishioners.

I don't know if you have noticed, but I certainly have. As we have continued to move out of this pandemic, returning more and more to full operations and seeking to find a new way of being the Body of Christ in this place, I have seen signs of the Holy Spirit at work. Breathing new life into the parish by working in and prompting each one of you. Bringing new members, new families, into our midst. Prompting and guiding some of our members—long-time, as well as newer—into involvement in various programs and ministries. We are growing, not just in terms of those regularly involved in the life of the parish, but also in terms of active participation in all aspects of parish life. Our Sunday attendance continues to tick up, approaching where we were before the pandemic (while many congregations are still a shadow of their former selves). More people are becoming involved in helping with worship as LEMs and lectors. Attendance at our Bible Study is at an all-time high. We have reestablished our Nursery. We are in the process of restarting our Sunday School program. We are expanding outreach opportunities. Attendance at our Supper Club dinners is greater than its ever been, with more people volunteering to host.

Not to mention the expanding shared ministry with St. Thomas of Canterbury. And I know—because that’s how the Spirit works—I know that even more is in store for St. Gregory’s, as the Holy Spirit continues, sometimes nudging, sometimes pushing, always lovingly guiding, us into new ways of being the Body of Christ.

Regardless of when or how the Holy Spirit first came on the scene—quietly on Easter, or exuberantly at Pentecost—one thing we know for sure, based on our own experiences individually and as a parish, is that the Holy Spirit is alive and well and active in our lives and in this place. And Jesus’ promise to his followers is that the Spirit will always be with us. Our job is to be open to receiving the Spirit, to be open to trusting the Spirit, to be open to living in the Spirit, whenever and however she makes her presence felt. Just imagine what can and will happen when we do.

Come, Holy Spirit, come!  
Amen.