

Sunday, May 19, 2024
Day of Pentecost (Year B)
Acts 2.1-21; John 15.26-27, 16.4b-15

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/446938881365028>

(Sermon begins at about 28:00)

“Our Customized Connection to God”

A number of years ago, I did some work with the Kaleidoscope Institute, an organization affiliated with the Diocese that focused on issues of diversity and helping congregations to live more fully into our Baptismal Covenant to “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.” One of the exercises we regularly did as part of our training programs was to have groups study today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles—the account of the Pentecost event and the coming of the Holy Spirit. One of the questions Eric Law, the director of Kaleidoscope, would always ask individuals and groups to consider was whether what occurred on that day in Jerusalem was a miracle of the tongue or a miracle of the ear. In other words, were people able to communicate because they were able to speak languages other than their own, a miracle of the tongue; or were they able to communicate because whatever language was spoken was somehow translated into their own, a miracle of the ear. Participants at the Kaleidoscope Institute training were to discuss this question, along with why they thought the miracle was one or the other—a miracle of the tongue or a miracle of the ear.

Of course, there is no right answer. The account in Acts points to both a miracle of the tongue and a miracle of the ear as being plausible explanations. We are first told that upon being filled with the Holy Spirit, those present in Jerusalem “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Implying a miracle of the tongue. We are then told that those present asked “And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” They go on to observe that, despite being from a variety of places, “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” Implying a miracle of the ear.

The purpose of the exercise was meant to allow participants in small groups to explore their own perspectives and interpretations of the Pentecost event, and to discuss how and why each participant differed in their answers. The goal being to demonstrate that different people experience the same event in different ways based on their own upbringing, education, previous experiences, etc. Recognizing that if we are going to engage with diversity in our lives and in our churches, we need to recognize that we are all different, and that we each bring our own perspectives to situations and particularly to life in community.

As apparent from Acts, the Pentecost event itself was an exercise in diversity: religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic. We are told that “there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven” gathered in Jerusalem. It helps to understand that Pentecost was actually a Jewish holy day before it was a Christian holy day. The term Pentecost simply means “fiftieth.” In the Jewish tradition, Pentecost refers to the fiftieth day after Passover, the most sacred of holy days. The

fiftieth day after Passover was the festival of Shavuot, also known as the Feast of Weeks, celebrating the end of the wheat harvest. In addition, rabbinic tradition holds that Shavuot was also the day on which God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. The giving of the Law being the sacramental act by which a rag-tag band of Hebrews recently liberated from slavery in Egypt became a nation committed to serving God. Which makes this festival celebration a big deal, not unlike our celebration of Independence Day. That being the case, Shavuot, or Pentecost, was one of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals (along with Passover and Sukkot) in which devout Jews would make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. Hence the presence of all the Jews who speak a variety of languages.

It was in the midst of this Jewish festival of Shavuot that God decides to send the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had promised the disciples on multiple occasions. As we heard in our Gospel reading for today, during his Farewell Discourse on Maundy Thursday Jesus tells his disciples, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.” And then immediately before his ascension, he tells them “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).

The Holy Spirit, arriving with “a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” visually appearing as tongues of fire resting on each of those present, so that “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Recognizing the diversity represented by those present. Meeting and engaging with those present in ways that accommodated their diversity. Meeting and engaging with those present in ways that were appropriate and understandable to the individual.

The coming of the Holy Spirit transforming a major Jewish celebration involving people from across the Diaspora, into what we now recognize as the birthday of the Church. Appropriate that a Jewish celebration of their formation as a nation dedicated to serving God also serves as the initial celebration of a new expression of that tradition with a common purpose, and recognizing our common heritage. The Church that would, in the fullness of time, expand far beyond its Jewish roots to incorporate members of all nations, races, cultures, and languages. Continuing and building upon the diversity present at that first Pentecost event.

As we consider the story of the first Pentecost event and what it means for us as people of faith, I find that I keep coming back to the question Eric Law always posed regarding what happened in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago: was this a miracle of the tongue or a miracle of the ear? As previously noted, there is no right answer. It is a matter of perspective. This is even acknowledged in the way the facts are presented: that people spoke in other languages, but also that everyone heard what was spoken in their own language. So, perhaps this was not an either/or, but rather a both/and. We obviously don’t know the particulars as to how all present were able to communicate, to be understood regardless of their native languages. But then again, we are dealing with the mysteries of how God operates. We are dealing with the mysteries of how God communicates with us. Which is, after all, what the Holy Spirit is all about. Not just providing a means of communication, but even in the diversity present, providing a sense of togetherness and unity that God desires for all his beloveds.

While the nature of the Holy Spirit is varied and complex, our basic understanding is that following Jesus' ascension, God sent the Holy Spirit to be God's ongoing presence with us, dwelling within us, to provide strength, guidance, nurture, and inspiration in our lives. To be our constant and ongoing companion as we move through our lives. As we live into the fullness of who God is creating us to be. Becoming an integral part of who we are as beloved children of God. The indwelling Spirit providing us with our direct connection with the Divine. At its simplest, the Holy Spirit could be considered the conduit for communication and ongoing relationship with God. The primary means by which relationship and communication occur between us and God.

Which brings us back to the Pentecost event in Jerusalem and viewing that event through the lens of whether this was a miracle of the tongue or a miracle of the ear. The reporting of what happened 2,000 years ago with the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the varied ways in which we each experience the Holy Spirit in our own lives demonstrates the unique nature of our relationship with God and with the Holy Spirit. A relationship that embraces and honors the diversity of who we are. That God recognizes we are not all the same. That our relationships with God are not all the same. That our faith is not a one-size-fits-all religion, but rather is tailor-made for who we are and for where we are in our relationship with God. That God, through the Holy Spirit meets us where we are. That God, through the Holy Spirit, comes to us and communicates with us in the way that we need in the moment.

This is what we celebrate on this Feast of Pentecost. That our God loves us so much and wants to be in relationship with us so much that he sent the Holy Spirit to be his ongoing presence in our lives. To be the conduit by which we are in direct communication with our God. To be the means by which God continually seeks to provide strength, guidance, nurture, and inspiration in our lives—in ways that are custom-made for who we are and where we are at any given moment in our lives. Always present and available to us.

May our ears be open to hearing Spirit's wisdom, and may our tongues be always ready to proclaim our thanks and praise for the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives.

Come, Holy Spirit, Come!