

Acts 2:1-21 • Psalm 104:25-35 • Romans 8:14-17 • John 14:8-17, 25-27 • Pentecost • Year C • May 23, 2010 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples began to speak in other languages *and* each person heard them in the native language of each [Acts 2:4-5]. Tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and rested on each one. There were miracles of speaking and hearing and seeing happening simultaneously. The crowd that quickly gathered was bewildered, amazed, astonished, perplexed. There were those who sought to understand and those who enjoyed the opportunity to make a wisecrack. By the words chosen to tell this story, we sense that the scene was unexpected, chaotic and difficult to describe.

Pentecost was a traditional major Jewish festival and was a reason for many to gather in Jerusalem. From ancient days, two months after Passover each year, the Israelites brought some of the first fruits and vegetables of the spring season as a thank offering to the Lord and as a gift to their priests. As they gathered, they celebrated together a spring agricultural festival called the Feast of Weeks that combined social interaction with the gathered community, and worship of God.

Later, when the Torah became the unifying symbol of an increasingly scattered people, this agricultural festival gained an additional layer of meaning as a commemoration of the giving of the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Still later, for Greek-speaking Israelites, this festival was called Pentecost because it was celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover.

The author of Acts developed the festival's meaning yet once more, transforming the Israelite festival of Torah and agriculture into a celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit for the followers of Jesus, a new revelation of first fruit. Pentecost has remained one of the most important feast days in the Christian calendar. As such, however, it has for some reason escaped the notice of wider culture, including the advertising industry: no special car deals this weekend, no store sales or television specials. I don't think anyone is suggesting that we should be exchanging Pentecost gifts. I think this lack of notice is because there really isn't anything to see. I find that many Christian churches, including Episcopal ones, don't quite know what to make of Pentecost. What is an appropriate way to recognize it and commemorate it?

Many sub-title Pentecost “the birthday of the Church” because we know how to celebrate birthdays. We can wrap our minds around that. Each year, we stretch ourselves to think about how to make the presence of the Holy Spirit meaningful and alive. What we have done here today *visually* is to highlight the color red, symbolizing joy *and* the fire of the Holy Spirit amongst us. As we look around the room, each bit of red and all the various hues remind us of the dance of flame, so the color red serves us well as a visual symbol that grounds us in something we know.

Fire is a powerful symbol, even for us today who do not depend on it in the same way that ancient people did. We are comforted by its warmth, fascinated by its movement and color, and I think if we are honest, still somewhat fearful of its power to destroy—and rightly so. A relative of one of our own Hanover police officers was killed in the recent fire and explosion in Colebrook. Fire presents a very real danger and, as a symbol

for the Holy Spirit, encourages us to take this person of the Trinity very seriously. Like fire, the Holy Spirit changes things; it transforms; and, yes, like fire, it has the power to destroy—to destroy the parts of us that get in the way of God’s work. And that’s a positive thing—our hope and trust is that by the power of the Holy Spirit God’s love is strong enough to overcome anything.

Another of our senses that we are involving symbolically today is our hearing because what we hear we cannot see. What was it really like on that day described in the Book of Acts? There was the sound of a violent wind. Wind we cannot see, except by its effect on other things. On the day of Pentecost there were many voices speaking words which cannot be seen. But we do make important truths visible by that which is invisible. As we do at every service, we become one in voice in the psalm, [and] in the prayers [and in our singing]. This is why we engage in these activities at church—to practice and show that we are one body, one body in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. When the Gospel was read this morning, there were many voices in several different languages. A murmur of sound that got our attention, language understood and not understood, perhaps it was even something unexpected.

These three phrases also describe the work of the Spirit: a murmur that gets our attention; a message understood and not understood; perhaps and often something unexpected.

The murmur of sound that got our attention this morning was with us all along. As a collected body, we have a pool of gifts and talents that we can draw upon at any time, if only we will. The Spirit is with us all along as our Advocate and Guide, nudging,

whispering. The Spirit is present to us always, if only we will notice. Jesus promised that the Spirit of truth, whom he would send, would be known to us because the Spirit would abide with us and in us.

Second, at the Gospel reading there was language understood and not understood. It may have been a challenge to hear a language that you understood. There *were* many voices. They were symbolic of the many competing voices that surround us every day of our lives—competing for our time and attention. We have to choose and be focused. The Spirit may be difficult to hear, but the Spirit is present, challenging, drawing us forward, speaking God’s word to us: “Peace. Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not let them be afraid.” [John 14:27]

And third, the way the Gospel was read today may have been unexpected. The Spirit also acts in the world and in our lives in unexpected ways. We aren’t required to notice or to listen. But if we want to be centered in the Spirit, we are called to be open, to have our hearts swept clean, so the Spirit can fill us with the breath of God.

Pentecost has always been a time to celebrate plenitude and fullness. Today, we experience the descent of the Holy Spirit into our lives. Today, the Spirit comes to reveal God’s truth to each of us. Today, the Holy Spirit is given to us so that we may have peace. Because the Spirit fills all things with the gift of God’s presence, we can be fully and completely who we are called to be, using to the fullest the gifts that we have been given. We will only find fullness of Life if we embrace the Spirit.

You may have heard the old story about Rabbi Ezra who, on Judgment Day, apologized to God for not being more like Moses. God replied, “I didn’t want you to be

like Moses. I didn't want you to be like Abraham. I want to know why you were not fully Rabbi Ezra.”

Howard Thurman, a 20<sup>th</sup> century American theologian and civil rights activist famously said, “Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” There are choices to be made—by each of us. And we can begin anew every day with an openness to embrace the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The failures of yesterday, the potential of tomorrow should not be what consume us. The choice that God sets before us today and every day is to be fully alive. And we can only be fully alive with God's help. You may have heard our bishop say this before, but I think it bears repeating: Christianity is not so much about life after death as about Life before death. The Spirit is here to give us Life. Thanks be to God. Amen.