

The Two Miracles of Pentecost

The Day of Pentecost – June 14, 2011

Acts 2:1-21c ✕ Psalm 104:25-28, 31-15 ✕ 1st Corinthians 12:3b-13 ✕ John 7:37-39

The Day of Pentecost brings together rich symbols and metaphors of the life of grace into which we are called as followers of Jesus Christ. The text . . . *and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . .* takes our minds all the way back to Creation. When . . . *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

God also sent a wind from heaven to blow back the waters of the Flood, restoring and renewing the earth so that Noah and his family could begin Creation anew. When Moses and the Hebrew children stood on the bank of the Red Sea with the armies of Pharaoh pressing upon them from behind, it was a wind from heaven that responded when Moses obeyed God's command and lifted up his hand.

A wind coming from heaven is a sign that the creative power of God is on the move. Creation begins with a wind from heaven. The Flood ends with a wind from heaven. Salvation and victory come to the Hebrew children of God with a wind from heaven.

And this morning, in our reading preserved from the very first days of our life in community with the Risen Christ, The Spirit of God descends upon the disciples *like the rush of a violent wind*. Remember that the use of the word *disciples* informs us that the Spirit descended upon *not only* upon Peter, James, John, and the other remaining of 'the eleven.' Disciples includes *the extended family* of friends

and followers of Jesus. Likely the sisters Mary and Martha, their brother Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, along with the mother and brothers of Jesus.

The sound of heaven that was like a mighty wind was not a restrictive, narrow movement of God. In the same way that we understand all of the acts of God in our lives, that sound from heaven that seemed like a mighty wind was broad and expansive. Sweeping up and changing the lives of everyone whom the Spirit encountered.

We next heard that . . . *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.*

As Luke continues his narrative of the Day of Pentecost he next brings together two other metaphors that remind us of the presence and the movement of God: fire and speech.

Moses first encounters the presence of God when he came upon "the burning bush". A bush that appeared to be on fire, yet was not consumed. The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that it was from within that fire that Moses heard the voice, first of an angel, and then from God. God was present to Moses, from within the fire.

There is another story that we have inherited

from the legacy of our Jewish sisters and brothers. You may remember the story of the three young men who refused to bow down and worship the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar, during the time of the Exile, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, when the Kingdom of Judah was in captivity in Babylon. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship the image of the King they were thrown into a fiery furnace, an eerie harbinger of the Holocaust of the Jews from our last century.

Just as the fire from God did not consume the burning bush before Moses, neither did the fire in Babylon consume the three young men. When Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace of hate and intolerance and destruction that he had prepared, he saw not only the three young men walking in the midst of the flames, but also a fourth figure, one who had the appearance of God.

Luke combines this imagery of God being present to the children of God from within a fire, with a final metaphor that cleverly ties all of this together. Luke chooses the imagery of tongues and the multiplication of language to complete his setting of the stage for the Day of Pentecost.

Returning to the Hebrew Bible again, we can be sure that Luke had in mind the story of the Tower of Babel. Where God sent *the curse* of many languages upon the people, out of fear that they might otherwise build their Tower all the way to heaven. How ironic that Luke would choose such an image to tell his own story of Pentecost.

Those some multiple languages that were at

one time a curse from God, now seen as a gift from God. Where once the gift of tongues served the intention of God by acting to divide the people, on the Day of Pentecost the gift of tongues serve as a moment of unity.

Once again, God is present for the people of God within a flame of fire, this time in the image of a tongue that now brings unity rather than division.

Eric Law in the magazine *The Other Side* points out that the *gift of tongues* is only one-half of the miracle of Pentecost. There is also the *gift of the ear*.¹

The true miracle on the Day of Pentecost has two parts that combine to make the whole. Not only did the disciple speak – the crowd listened and heard.

That is a miracle the likes of which we are in much need today. You can take your pick – the Anglican Communion; American politics; the behavior of the dictators in the Middle East who continue to suppress and even kill their own people.

But we must not look only at the ‘big picture’ of politics – that would be too easy and too cheap a date. We must also consider examples from within our own daily lives, in our families, at work, here in the parish. Our own lives are in dire need of the miracle of rational, clear and honest speech, and the twin miracle of rational, clear, and honest listening.

That perhaps is just one of the many lessons we can from the story of Pentecost. The lesson that within our life with God, we can experience reality in a transformed way.

A reality where we can speak and listen in a way that brings us to unity, rather than to division.

A reality where the Holy Spirit brings new life and transformation. Where separation is transformed into union. Where fear of the other is transformed into welcome to those who are different from ourselves.

A reality where loneliness is transformed into community; where anger and resentment are transformed into love and celebration.

The Day of Pentecost challenges us to be ready for those winds from heaven that always bring change and new life.

To be ready to acknowledge the presence of God when our hearts, our minds, and our souls, are ablaze with God's love.

To be ready to speak, and to be ready to listen.

To be ready for the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and among us.

Come Holy Spirit; enlighten the dark corners of our living; that all may clearly see Jesus as God's power to make all new.

Come Holy Spirit; empower our resolve to share the good news; that all may share the peace of God in Christ Jesus.

Come Holy Spirit; make us instruments of your peace; that all the world may know the incomprehensible love of God.

In the powerful name of Jesus Christ, Amen.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ www.hrc.org/out in scripture. May 11, 2008.

ⁱⁱ www.hrc.org/prayerfully out in scripture. May 11, 2008.