

Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4; Galatians 4:1-7)

Over the past weeks, we dealt with Paul's writing to churches that have apparently come under the influence of those teaching a law-observant Christianity. Their argument goes like this: to be properly Christian, one must become properly Jewish, including, for males, the rite of circumcision. The fact that the males in the churches of Galatia were apparently seriously considering this way of being Christian (in a time without modern anaesthesia, sterile operating conditions, or antibiotics) is evidence of the teachers' persuasive speeches.

To convince his readers of the folly of this "other gospel", Paul argues that law observance was always intended to be an interim chapter in the long story of God's interaction with humanity. With Christ's death and resurrection, a new chapter has begun.

Seven weeks after Easter each year, Christians celebrate Pentecost. Like so many of our Christian traditions, Pentecost has its origins in Judaism. The Feast of Pentecost is one of the three main feasts celebrated in the Jewish year. Occurring fifty days after Passover, the feast was designed to offer God the first fruits of the new grain harvest: "a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing that you have received from the LORD your God". It celebrated the completion of the spring harvest and commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

The feast included "you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the

orphans, and the widows who are among you”, and was based on remembrance “that you were a slave in Egypt”. The Old Testament Pentecost remembers and embodies the story of God bringing people out of slavery into their own land with their own harvest and bounty.

Both Pentecosts originate in experiences of God’s gift of new life in a world in which the potential for oppression, violence, and death constantly lie close at hand. According to Jewish tradition, the Law was also offered to Gentile nations, but only Israel accepted it. So, Pentecost reminded the people of both the universality of Israel's God, and the particularity of Israel's relationship with God.

For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Spirit upon the followers of Jesus some fifty days after Easter, fulfilling a promise made by the risen Christ. The result was the beginning of the post-Easter mission of the early Christian movement.

The Christian story of Pentecost, found in the Book of Acts, was written near the end of the first century by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. The story is filled with richly symbolic language drawn from the Jewish tradition.

According to the Acts story, the apostles had already gathered together in order to celebrate the feast. Suddenly they heard a “mighty rushing” wind come from heaven and fill the house where they were assembled. Next they saw what appeared to be tongues of fire rest on each one of them. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they began speaking in languages they did not know. The wind along with the sound of all the

different languages, drew a “multitude” who stood amazed as the apostles told them of the wonders of God, in their own native tongues.

In the Hebrew Bible, wind and fire are both associated with the presence of God. In Hebrew, the same word is used for both "wind" and "spirit", as in the creation story where the divine wind (or spirit) moves over the primordial waters.

Fire is an image for the divine presence, as in the story of Moses and the bush that burned without being consumed. Just as it was at the beginning of creation and in the history of Israel, the Spirit of God was again at work, creating the new community of the church.

The gift of tongues in Acts is not an ecstatic display that leaves the many excluded from the spiritual experience of the few; rather, the disciples speak in foreign languages so that native speakers of those languages may hear the good news of Jesus Christ addressed to them directly and come to be included in the number of believers and followers.

For Paul, speaking in tongues as opposed to foreign languages, is one of the gifts of the Spirit, and is unintelligible speech. To quote from Paul in I Corinthians, "Those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people, but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit." This practice continues among some Christians today – Pentecostals or Charismatics. Speaking in tongues is unintelligible praise and prayer "language" addressed directly to God, and is not understood by anyone else.

But in Acts, speaking in tongues or foreign languages at Pentecost was very different. Its effect was the opposite: Jews in Jerusalem from the many different countries and language groups of the Jewish diaspora understood, each in their own language, what the followers of Jesus were saying. They marvelled: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" Rather than being unintelligible speech, it was supremely intelligible.

So, when we think of Pentecost, we think of fire and wind and the onslaught of a violent storm. We think of speaking in tongues and that unusual experience of "foreigners" hearing and understanding the "noble things of God" without the assistance of an interpreter. But there is much more to Pentecost. Sometimes we get so involved with the mysterious details of Pentecost that we miss the greater meaning.

In Galatians, God sends the Spirit so that those who receive it may address God in the most intimate of familial terms ("Abba, Father") and know God as Jesus knows God. The continuing presence of the Spirit is the life of the risen Christ, shared with the church for the sake of the world.

Both the identity of the Spirit and the Spirit's work are specific. Christ's living presence is knitting human community back together and bringing humanity back into a relationship of love and familial commitment with God. In John's Gospel, Jesus breathes the Spirit onto his disciples so that they may continue his work.

The reality is that the Holy Spirit moved the disciples from sadness to joy and from survival to renewal. The reality is that the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' followers at Pentecost. That implies that the meaning of Pentecost is that Jesus is forever present!

After the ascension, Jesus was gone. The incompetent followers of the now-departed Jesus are in Jerusalem where they plan to participate in the Festival of Pentecost. These followers have no idea as to how they will carry out Jesus' last directive "to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth".

Abruptly, as unpredictable as a tornado, Jesus is present with them. Mysterious and powerful, he's alive and near. The followers speak of this energizing invisible presence as the Holy Spirit. The same God who moved and worked through the earthly Jesus continues to move and work in the present.

The identity of the Spirit is specific and specifically tied to the identity of the risen Christ. The Spirit's work is to draw humanity into a relationship with God like the one the Father and Son share.

In popular culture, "spiritual" is a generic term that describes any mystical experience or ethereal sense. It is almost as if the more unknown or unknowable a thing is, the more the word "spiritual" applies to it. But in Acts and Galatians, the Spirit that Jesus shares with his followers is His Spirit, His life. It is known. Testimonies about its power for healing (in Acts) or its capacity for prayer (as in Romans or Galatians) make it clear that the Spirit is the risen Christ's own living

presence, available to His followers even while He is physically absent from them.

This was beautifully expressed by a biblical scholar who said, “Pentecost's consequence was that Jesus became alive again, and powerful, and forever thereafter present, wherever two or three are gathered in His name” and “Jesus was no longer a has-been.” Christianity could not have survived for long solely on the strength of its historical memories of Jesus of Nazareth.

Explaining why she found prayer so difficult, a woman stammered, “It's just that Jesus seems so long ago and so far away.” It's astounding that Jesus has not been forgotten. After all, He lived a very short time in a backward part of the world, so very long ago. He wrote no books and left no pictures. He shied away from all publicity. Even after His miracles, He would whisper, “Don't tell anybody.” He died on a lonely hillside between two thieves, and even His resurrection occurred rather quietly. Thus, every day Jesus is ignored or denied or overlooked by countless numbers. So why has He not been forgotten?

The only possible explanation is the activity of God through the Holy Spirit. What happened 2,000 years ago is made contemporary by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes the manger, the cross and the empty tomb all relevant to us today.

Pentecost also means the church community is empowered! This empowerment occurs in the community's “coming together.” Luke reports that “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” Were they all there? Yes. Were they all together? Yes. Were they all in one place? Yes. This

community context is also mentioned in Acts where the followers of Jesus are said to be “all united in their devotion to prayer.” Jesus had invited his followers “to stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” It is almost as if being together in the context of community, ready and expectant, provides the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost was a communal experience, and it was only because they were together that “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Following the original intent of the feast of Pentecost, which was to offer to God the first-fruits of the harvest, the Apostles offered the first-fruits of their ministry that day. They would go on to lead many more to Christ — in other nations and among other tribes and tongues. Their work would not have been possible if it hadn't been for the supernatural equipping of the Holy Spirit.

The church remains empowered as individuals and as communities. Acts speaks of “all” being together and “all” being filled with the Spirit as well as “each one” upon whom the Spirit rested. The same can be said for those who heard them – the large group of individuals from every nation who each heard testimonies in their own languages and who responded both personally and en masse. The Spirit acts at every level. We can be confident that whether we bear witness to one or to thousands, in a small room or an arena, on street corners or country roads, it's the same work of God, generated by the same Spirit, making real the presence of the

resurrected Christ.

While it is true that the Holy Spirit blows where He wills, it is clearly in the direction of community building. The Spirit blows in the direction of overcoming divisions, removing the barriers that separate people and bringing them together. Last week we read that, “In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. All are one in Christ.” Wherever community building is taking place, there we find the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost, being in community, ready and expectant, gave birth to the church. Next, we see this empowerment in the community “going public.” This is one of the main points of Acts. Jesus had been raised from the dead, shown to be Lord and Saviour, but nobody knew how to talk about it. And few possessed the courage to speak of it. But then, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended and things were brought to speech. People began to talk to one another and then to those on the streets.

We believe in Jesus Christ and much of what goes along with him, but when it comes to speaking of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit, we become hesitant in our speaking. Oftentimes, our robust yells fade into quiet whispers. We are familiar with the Holy Spirit's name, and we know that the Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity. But can we confidently say, “We've got the Spirit?”

Pentecost means that a new wind of mission work is let loose upon the earth. Pentecost means that God is empowering the church to reach out “to offer them

Christ.” At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit shoves the church from the safety of locked doors in the Upper Room into the struggles and realities of the world's needs and meaninglessness without Christ.

Yes, what happened at Pentecost can happen to us. On the night of the crucifixion, it was Peter **near** the fire. He followed from afar and warmed himself by the fire. Then it was Peter **in** the fire when he failed to live up to his boast and denied his Lord, and got into trouble. But on the day of Pentecost, it was Peter **on** fire, empowered by the Holy Spirit to courageous witness. And we are told that what happened to Peter happened to all the disciples. And, yes, it can happen to us.

The Church remains linked to fire: the pillar of fire that guided Israel through its Exodus nights, the cooking fires essential for feasts to which all – men, women, children, slaves, strangers, orphans, and widows – are invited, and the cloven tongues of fire still resting upon the church and sending us out with other languages into ministries we never imagined.

A large number of new members were received into a church and were asked what brought them to this particular church. Several answers were given – newspaper advertising, hearing the services on radio or television, the minister, the youth program, the music, etc. – but by far, the largest number said, “I came to this church because of a personal invitation from one of the members.”

One of the real miracles of Pentecost was not so much the speaking in foreign languages, but the listening. The listeners **heard** about “God's deeds of power” in

their own multiple languages. So, Pentecost was a powerful miracle of **hearing** as well as speaking. This should also speak loud and clear to the contemporary church, in a biblical, relevant and vital way. The Gospel message should address the people where they actually live, and speak to them in languages or ways that they can truly understand, and move them to ask the question, "What does this mean?"

There was a little Christian lady named Ethel Young. Every Sunday for 25 years Ethel went to the City County Jail to teach the prisoners their Sunday School lesson. It didn't matter to her whether these prisoners had committed a major or a minor crime, whether they were black, white or whatever. Every Sunday for 25 years she was faithfully there.

Then one Sunday Ethel had to miss Sunday School because she was ill. During her illness she received many get well cards, mostly the store-bought kind. Ethel showed her pastor one of the special handmade cards she had received. When he opened it, there, written in the messiest handwriting he had ever seen, were these words: "We miss you very much." Signed, "Your boys at the City County Jail."

As God's people we are to share God's story in languages and in ways that people who have never heard it can understand. Come, O Holy Spirit! Do it again!

Amen.