

**Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Richmond, Virginia
Feast of Pentecost
June 12, 2011**

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. 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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'* "

John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

We have made it to the fiftieth day of Easter, to the Feast of Pentecost. Originally an agricultural festival in the Jewish tradition it is observed by Christians as a "Festival of the Holy Spirit" because of what happened in the Early Church.

We meet the Spirit throughout the Bible. The spirit did not make its first appearance at the Pentecost following Jesus crucifixion. We read in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, that in the beginning the spirit of God moved over the face of the waters. We also read that God reached into the dust of the earth to form Adam and breathes life into him...and this surely is the life giving spirit of God. And of course, the Spirit continued to be present, speaking through the prophets, as the Creed has it and in so many other ways. So the Spirit of God has been an on-going presence from the beginning.

And yet, on that Pentecost so long ago, in Jerusalem, not long after Jesus' death, ...the Spirit was poured out in a new way and for a new purpose. A new age had dawned. And so, Pentecost became a festival of the Holy Spirit.

We have two versions of the story in the Bible. We read them both this morning, one from volume two of Luke's Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, the other from the Fourth Gospel...the Gospel of John.

The writers of the New Testament are not reporters or journalists. They are not historians, in the modern sense of that word. They are not disinterested observers or researchers, as reporters and historians are meant to be.

If anything, we can say, they are artists...they paint a portrait of Jesus. In their palate they have primary colors...the broad outlines of a story, parables and teachings, deeds of power...and they take these things and mix them together in unique ways, with subtle tints and mixtures. In this way they paint their portraits of Jesus of Nazareth. And make no mistake, their portraits are designed to move us...they are not meant to be cold and objective.

We don't expect them to all look alike and they don't. Matthew, Mark and Luke are similar in some ways...as though they had the same painting teacher. But John, he stands out from the others, doesn't he? His is a bit like a cubist painting, presenting a lot of angles or perspectives at once. I had a professor once who said, "John is the least factual but the most true." That is worth pondering!

In John's telling of the story of the gift of the Spirit it is the evening of the first day of the week and Jesus appears in the midst of the disciples. He tells them they are to do what he has been doing. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And then, to make the impossible possible, Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Clearly, this story harks back to the creation of human beings, where God breathed and gave life. Jesus gives new life and he gives a mission, in the power of the spirit.

The Story from Acts about Pentecost is by far the most familiar. The disciples are gathered together, the Spirit comes in a rush. Tongues as of fire rest on the disciples, and in the power of the Spirit, they become witnesses, they pick up the mission, they do what Jesus had been doing. Peter quotes Scripture to say, "Yes, this is what we have been waiting for, God is pouring out his spirit on the young and old, on men and women, on all flesh." Recreation has begun. The old divisions are being defeated. The mission moves forward.

These are great biblical stories. They have their unique perspectives, but they have great similarities as well. Ultimately, both stories are about spirit, about renewal, about mission. They recall ancient Old Testament stories even as they move the story forward in new ways. Perhaps most important, in each version, Jesus' followers begin to do what Jesus himself had been doing.

But...and there is always a "but" isn't there... But with either version of the story, I can't help but ask, "What about us? Do we not get to experience the Spirit?"

We cannot transport ourselves back in time. We cannot be in that room which John's gospel talks about, the evening of the first day, with the disciples and see Jesus with our own eyes...we can't literally feel his breath being breathed over us.

We cannot gather on that first Pentecost in Jerusalem after Jesus' death as Acts relates the story, and hear the rush as of a mighty wind, see tongues of fire. In fact, we can't even recreate the experience now. I checked and our insurance carrier informed me that tongues of fire in this place would render our policy invalid. So are we to do? Are we left out?

Of course not! First of all, were it not for God's sustaining spirit, the universe would simply slip back into the chaos from which it came. The fact that we are here is evidence of the Spirit. Existence, in an off itself, is a miracle of the Spirit.

But there is more than simply that, more to the Spirit than simply to say, "We exist." To get at it, let me tell you a story. Are you familiar with John Steinbeck's novel, "The Grapes of Wrath." It was published in 1939 in the depths of the Depression. A movie was made in 1940 starring Henry Fonda as the main character, Tom Joad.

Tom Joad gets out of prison, heads to his home in Oklahoma. On the way he meets up with a former preacher by the name of Casy. It turns out that everyone has headed West, Joad's family included. Their land has been taken over by the banks. Because of the Dust Bowl and the depression they couldn't make a go of it and are hoping to start over in California.

Woody Guthrie wrote a song called "Do, Re, Mi" that sums up what happened when they did get to California:

"California is a garden of Eden," he sang "a paradise to live in or see, but believe it or not, you won't find it so hot, if you ain't got the do, re, mi."

Suffice it to say, things do not go well in California. The farm workers strike, trying to force the land owners to pay a living wage. Preacher Casy is killed by some strike breaking thugs. Tom Joad kills the attacker and so becomes a fugitive. And in the movie, before he sets out he gives this speech, as he says goodbye to his mother.

"I'll be all around in the dark. I'll be ever'-where - wherever you can look. Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad - I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise, and livin' in the houses they build - I'll be there, too."

Well, our experience of the Spirit is similar. Jesus was not a fugitive, but he did return to the Father. At the same time, he did not leave us comfortless. But Christ prays and the father sends the Spirit to lead us into all truth and to make God's presence real.

And so, we can truly say the spirit is there when we offer someone a meal in our soup kitchen. The spirit is there each and every time you share the faith of Christ and invite someone to join in God's work of recreation.

It is there to meet you when you go to Anna Julia Cooper school, or to Belize, or St. Andrew's School or to the Peter Paul Development Center or in all the good work you do to make this world better for children.

It is there when you take the time to teach your own children how to pray and when you read the Bible to them. The spirit is there by the bedside as you care for your loved one who is ill. It is with you at work, when you refuse cut corners or when you resist a "business as usual" attitude that perpetuates injustice.

The spirit is there when you fulfill your baptismal vows, to respect the dignity of every human being and struggle to make this world a better place for all. It is there when you honor all the vows and promises you have made to the people in your life. The spirit is there when we admit that we have been wrong and ask for forgiveness...forgiveness we do in fact receive in the Spirit, from Almighty God. In all these things and more, the spirit is not only there, but none of these things could happen except for the spirit. The spirit makes the impossible possible.

So, we may not be able to be with the disciples on the evening of the Day of the First Resurrection. We may not be able to be with the disciples when the wind rushed and the fire came. But the angel says to us, "Why do you stand there looking only at the past. Look around you. The Spirit is in your very midst. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus in the Spirit, sends you." This is what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.