



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Re-Enchantment of Creation

Acts 2:1-13

A sermon by William M. Klein

9 June 2019

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 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. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2:1-13 NRSV)

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"We choose to be Christian in order to become Christian."¹ You've heard me share this quote from theologian Karl Rahner before. And I'm pretty sure what Rahner said is just about all any of us can say. We choose to be Christian in order that we may really become Christian.

Our reading for today is the Pentecost story as told by Luke. The lectionary appoints this reading from the Acts of the Apostles...but that is not the only thing that commends this passage. The Lord's Supper we will receive in a few minutes, the baptisms we participate in around the baptismal font, the formational and transformational ministries we engage in are all meaningless and hollow practices apart from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is vitally important...

But let me back up a bit to pick up the historical context. As nearly as we can tell, the order of events was as follows: Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem just prior to Passover. He was buried in an unused tomb on Friday. By Sunday morning God raised him from the dead. According to all four evangelists, the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples...which included a group of men and women larger than Jesus' twelve disciples. As word spread of his resurrection, more and more of Jesus' followers who had scattered after the crucifixion gathered and spent what must have been a remarkable forty days together with the risen Jesus. Then, according to the writer of Luke's gospel, Jesus ascended – he left them. He had given his followers clues that eventually he would have to leave them. He had said, "I must go away so God may send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to guide you into all truth."²

As nearly as we can tell, this is what happened. What this ordering of events leaves out, though, is how the disciples reacted to all of this. It is not hard to image the disciples were bewildered, frightened, unsure of what to do next. Jesus' **crucifixion** on that awful

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cross filled them with remorse and fear...and so they fled in all directions. His **resurrection** shocked them and filled them with a different type of fear. After all, resurrection is an awesome and fearful thing. His **ascension** left them once again alone and unsure of what to do next...but according to Luke, they were no longer bewildered or frightened.³

When the reading for today begins, Jesus' followers had returned to Jerusalem from Galilee where the ascension had taken place. They gathered in an upper room where, with the women, they devoted themselves day after day to prayer.

On the day of Pentecost, Jesus' followers were gathered in one place.⁴ In case you do not know this...Pentecost was a Jewish holiday before it was a Christian holiday. It was and is a Jewish festival known as Shavout or the Feast of Weeks. As Passover marked the beginning of Spring, Shavout celebrates the beginning of Summer. It signifies the year's first harvest...and so there is the offering to God of "first fruits."

But Shavout has more than one meaning. It also has to do with the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai. The "law" was given by God to the Israelites to serve as guide-stones, signposts to show them the right way to journey forth...direction markers to help them remember who they were and how to live.⁵

So...by keeping in mind the double meaning, Shavout reminds Israelites they need the law as much as they need food grown by the farmers. To have a full, rich life, it is necessary that one's regular diet include both.

2

The followers of Jesus were gathered in one place in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Without much of an idea what was going to happen, they nonetheless were determined to commit themselves to daily prayer until Jesus' promised Advocate arrived. Suddenly, the room was filled with the sound of a rushing wind. Tongues as of fire appeared all around them and rested on each of them. And they all were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Whether they knew in advance this was what they had been waiting for – the gift of the Spirit was the fulfillment of Jesus' promise. He had said God would send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit – to remind them of everything Jesus had said and to teach them faithful living.

John scholar, Gail O'Day, helps us understand the role of the Holy Spirit. She says that on the one hand, the Holy Spirit's role was to remind the disciples what Jesus had taught them. This was what she called a **conserving** role – i.e., enabling the disciples and each of us to reach back into the teaching of Jesus and "remember" – to bring Jesus' teachings to life afresh with new understanding. The Spirit's role was also to be **creative** – to enable the word of Jesus to move forward from its moment in history and be applied and adapted to every present moment in the life of the church.

The Spirit's job, then, wasn't just to help the faithful recall Jesus teachings. The Spirit's job was and is to give new meanings to the teachings of Jesus as the changing circumstances of faith communities and the world demand.⁶

Pentecost ushered in a new way for them to be the people of God. As the disciples listened to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and talked about what they heard, a model for ministry took shape – a model that has shaped the church from that day to our own. It is a

model to which Christian reformers from that time forward have returned to redefine, refocus, and reclaim the nature of the church.

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And because it is so important that we let the Holy Spirit do this **conserving** and **creative** work in us, too...it would be well for us to be clear about the witness of the earliest Christians...to see what this conserving and creative work looked like practiced by the early church.

Luke tells us the Holy Spirit led them to hold all things in common. Followers of Jesus sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. They spent their days together worshiping in the temple, then broke bread at home, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.⁷ In short, the pentecostal experience of the earliest disciples was an enactment of the traditional Jewish Pentecost – a bringing together of the food for the spirit and food for the body.

The story of Pentecost began in an upper room and ended in the streets of Jerusalem. The wind of the Spirit of God blew them from the safety of a private room out into the public square.⁸ Their pentecostal experience had nothing to do with pushing the competition aside in order that they may reach the top alone and have Christ to themselves – nothing to do with personal achievement at all. Rather, their experience had to do with community – with mutual ministry – with caring for the basic needs of body and spirit as anyone had need – with loving God and neighbor with heart and soul, words and deeds.

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On this Pentecost, I guess my message is an invitation for us to be grateful. With gratitude for God’s generous provision – with gratitude for the gift of the church – with gratitude for all those people who helped shape us into people of faith – with gratitude for the ways each of us will help to nurture the faith in others – with gratitude for the opportunities the Spirit will place before us to serve the downcast, broken, and lost...with gratitude let us come to the Lord’s Table. As we are gathered here by God’s Spirit from east and west and north and south – let us take our place among that great cloud of witnesses who give glory to God. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Karl Rahner, the Roman Catholic theologian, literally said, “We are Christian in order to become Christian.”

² See John 14:16-17; 14:23-29; 15:26; 16:7-15.

³ See Luke 24:50-53. After Jesus’ crucifixion and burial, the disciples scattered in fear and confusion. Listen to the way Luke describes their behavior after Jesus’ ascension. **50** *Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.* **51** *While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.* **52** *And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;* **53** *and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

⁴ Pentecost took place 50 days after Passover – so it must have been 10 days from the time of the Ascension.

⁵ Ward-Lev, Nahum. 2019. The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets - Then and Now. NY: Orbis Books, 37.

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⁶ O'Day, Gail R. 1995. John. *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. IX. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 777. Sadly Gail O'Day passed away this past September after contending with a glioblastoma brain tumor for nearly four years. I am grateful for the gift of her wonderful scholarship.

⁷ See Acts 2:43-47.

⁸ Ward, Hannah & Wild, Jennifer. 2003. Resources for Preaching and Worship – Year C. Louisville: WJK Press, 171-172. Citing work by Bill Wylie Kellermann, *Seasons of Faith and Conscience: Kairos, Confession, Liturgy*, 200-201.