

Sermon 060417 Pentecost
Scripture- Acts 2: 1-13
Sermon Title- Getting It

This is the holiday called Pentecost. Christianity has changed dramatically over the 20 centuries it has existed. One change is in the diminishment of Pentecost as a major holiday for Christians. Medieval Europe Pentecost was called Whitsunday and was a much bigger holiday than Christmas.

Although the holidays are very different, Jews also celebrate Pentecost. For Jews, Pentecost takes place 50 days after Passover. For them, it is an agricultural holiday plus it celebrates the reception of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. They call the holiday Shavuot. The story that we read this morning from the Acts of the Apostles takes place during the Jewish Pentecost celebration in Jerusalem.

It was a chaotic scene in the streets of Jerusalem. People, Jews and gentiles had traveled to Jerusalem from all over the known world and the streets were teeming with diverse people in exotic garb, speaking in different languages in high spirits. The crowds were jostling and bargaining, there were street performers; people were cooking strange foods with curious smells. It was the bazaar and it was bizarre. The scene brings to my mind Harvard Square on a warm Saturday afternoon.

Yet our lesson from Acts has another image even more fascinating than the street scene. It takes place in the enclosed room where the Apostles had gathered. Earlier, in the first chapter, the Apostles had

gathered in the ‘upper room,’ which very possibly could have been the room where Jesus had conducted the Last Supper. The image involves a mighty wind inside and heavenly tongues of fire. It was the arrival of the Holy Spirit in fantastic and exotic fashion.

Here is how it is described in Acts, “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

This scene is up there with some of the most exotic and wondrous scenes in Scripture. The parting of the Red Sea, the Burning Bush, the Transfiguration of Jesus, The Resurrection, and now this arrival of the Holy Spirit are times in Scripture that can bring us to our knees in awe before the glory of God that emerges from Scripture. This Pentecost scene is unique in the Bible in that it takes place inside. It is a room invaded by the phenomenon of the divine, a secret place made holy and transformed.

So, we’ve got the exotic and chaotic street scene surpassed by the even more exotic and chaotic scene in the upper room. The third image this morning is the most fantastic of all and it ties the other two together.

It is in the line, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

This is the origin of the aspect of Christianity called, “Pentecostal.” This is the people who, through the power of the Holy Spirit are able to spread the good news to people in all languages. In modern times, the ability to speak in tongues is called, ‘glossolalia.’

There are many who claim to be able to speak in tongues, many more than those that actually can. When I was in college, there was a character that seemingly came out of nowhere named Brother Julius. Some of the people that I knew in high school became his followers for a while. I went to see him once and came away with the distinct impression that he was a 1970’s version of the flim flam man. He would jerk around and make strange noises, which he called ‘speaking in tongues.’ It was a ritual that was interesting to witness. I never caught what he was supposed to be communicating. After that little ceremony I did understand his interest in people’s money. *That* message came through clearly. I also know some of his followers well enough to know that their religious experiences were, shall we say, chemically enhanced. It was the seventies.

That is not to say that glossolalia is not real. I believe it is. I just bring a healthy skepticism when I hear of it. As ‘speaking in tongues’ is practiced in Pentecostal churches, it involves elaborate practices involving interpreters and such.

What we know from this scene in Acts, is that something happened. That group of Christ followers went into that room to pray together. They were concerned about the future, that what happened to Jesus might also happen to them. They came out of the room with the power of the Holy Spirit. They were full of faith, hope, and courage to spread the good news. And they suddenly had the ability to spread the good news to those speaking in different tongues. The Holy Spirit was working in mysterious ways.

Those disciples back then we the living can ‘get it’ when we talk about how the Spirit moves in the world. In this case, the Holy Spirit moves in people who are able to spread the good news in the world.

The gift of Pentecost overcame the curse of Babel. At Babel, the people tried to build a tower to reach the heavens. Their motivation was pride and ambition. They wanted to frustrate the divine purpose and grab God’s power for themselves. Instead, their tongues were confused (they ‘babbed’) and were unable to communicate so the tower failed.

Their communication failed when people of Babel’s purpose was their own quest to grab divine power. The Pentecost story answers that Babel story by giving people the ability to communicate in different tongues when they pursue God’s purposes.

So what does all of that mean for all of us? Well, plenty. I suspect that each of you has, or I hope you have had, religious experiences. I am speaking of moments in which you were having a God experience.

Somehow, God was breaking through to you. Even if you only had a moment, for that moment you were ‘getting it.’ God was present for you at that time. This has maybe happened many times for you.

It may have been when you were reading the Bible. It might have been in a beautiful scene in nature. It might have been in someone else. I have told my story here. I heard a gifted young preacher by the name of The Rev. Dr. Shelly Stackhouse who helped me ‘get it’ when she preached about Jesus. Even when the speaker and the listener use the same language, the Holy Spirit moves in people.

At Workcamp, each evening there is a sharing of ‘God sightings’ when campers talk of when they saw God at work that day. You might see it each day when you witness an act of kindness. You might see it when a car stops so another can make a turn. You might feel it in the experience of love. You hear the message in a way that is different than you have ever considered and suddenly you are there. You are transformed. The good news reached you.

We should remember, you and I, that we are members of a fellowship that exceeds our capacity to define it. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news, has spread through the centuries, spread beyond every ocean, spread through all the diversity that the world has to offer, to reach you and me in this out of the way place. The miracle of Pentecost is very much alive.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended, and with a mighty wind and cloven tongues of fire for a moment overcame human differences and united that diverse and dispirited group who finally ‘got it.’ They heard the good news, as they were, where they were, and they were never the same again. Pentecost is many things-fire, wind, ecstasy, and renewal- but more than all that it is the Spirit whose gift is that of people getting it about who they are and whose they are.

We celebrate today once again that gift to them and to us, and we pray that what transformed them transforms us, and with us the world.

AMEN