

# The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

Jesus has made good on his promise. Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them alone. He was crucified and the disciples wondered if he had forgotten about that promise. But on the third day, he was raised to new life and appeared to them in the flesh. But then, he ascended into heaven and again was no longer there. So, again, they may have wondered if Jesus had forgotten his promise not to leave them alone. So, they gathered in familiar places, looking, waiting, wondering, "Now what?"

You know that place. Sometimes, the "Now what?" question looms large at a time of grief. For the disciples, when Jesus was crucified and three years of their lives seemed to have been lost to the greatest scam ever, they had asked the question, "Now what?" When we lose someone that we love, we often don't know what to do next. Nothing seems as worthwhile as it used to be. "Now what?" reflects our despair.

Sometimes, though, the "Now what?" question comes after a time of great celebration. Jesus was raised from the dead. The disciples rejoiced as they saw him ascend into heaven. And then as the clouds closed again and it became an ordinary day, they looked at each other and said, "Now what?" When we have a great celebration that we have been looking forward to and planning for - like a wedding or a vacation - and then, seemingly all of a sudden it is over, we ask, "Now what?"

Certainly that was the question on their minds as the disciples gathered on that Pentecost Day. They were in Jerusalem and the city was packed with Jews who had traveled there from every region for the festival day. Pentecost marks fifty days after the Passover feast for the Jews, just as for Christians it now marks fifty days after the celebration of Easter. The city was alive with animals and humans, worship services, harvest festivals and most of all, voices. There was shouting in the markets, conversation on the streets and everyone was speaking in their native tongue. I imagine that it was much like being in New York City or any other great city of the world on a rather ordinary day. That is one of the things I love about New York. You can go into coffee shops and restaurants hear a dozen different languages being spoken around you.

In the place where the twelve were gathered, the echo of one of the disciples lamenting again, "Now what?" is interrupted by the sound of rushing wind. It is the whistling, hastening wind of a coming summer storm and it is so loud that all the voices of every kind are silenced for a moment. And then there appeared blazing tongues of fire that withstood the strong wind. The wind and the flames ceased as quickly as they had come, and voices were heard once again. But now they were voices that had not been heard out of those twelve mouths ever before. The disciples were not a very diverse group. All of them were Galileans. Most were fishermen. All of them spoke the same language. Or at least they had spoken the same language. But now, the

wind and flame had changed that once and for all and the Holy Breath had filled them and they were ablaze with gifts of the Spirit. This time the gift was the ability to speak in different languages.

It might seem at first that this was a less than helpful gift. After all, different languages create barriers of communication and can lead to confusion. For example, look what happened at the Tower of Babel all those years earlier. God gave those folks the ability to speak in all different languages and they were so divided and confused that they had spread to all corners of the earth! But now the gift of different languages made possible something that had not been possible before. Here were the disciples, charged with spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth and they could only speak one language! But now, now by the power of the Holy Spirit, language barriers are broken and they can communicate God's love to the ends of the earth.

The crowds were of course attracted by the mighty rush of wind and the tongues of fire. Wind and fire almost always get people's attention. At first they too were confused by the gift that the Spirit had brought. Twelve Galileans all speaking twelve or more different languages - and not just any language - their own language, each one of them! Their confusion combined powerfully with amazement and they gasped, "What does this mean?"

It's a question that almost always follows the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has a curious way. The Spirit has a double nature, which is why confusion and amazement accompany the Spirit almost everywhere. The Holy Spirit stirs us up, sometimes scatters our plans, and seems to throw us into chaos. The Spirit also calms us, confirms God's call, and creates order in our lives. That's why the Biblical metaphors for the Spirit are all double sided as well. Wind can be cool and refreshing on a hot day, but it can also be fierce and powerful. Fire can be warm and soothing, almost mesmerizing in its beauty, but it can be dangerous and consuming as well. The Holy Spirit of God is not a tame Spirit. You never know what will happen when the Spirit is at work. At the same time, though, the Holy Spirit is also trustworthy. Jesus told us, when he made that promise to never leave us alone, that God would send us an Advocate.

The Holy Spirit is that Advocate. That means that everything the Spirit does in us and among us is ultimately for the good of human beings, even if at first it seems confusing or even dangerous. The Holy Spirit supports us, backs us up, and believes in us. And the Holy Spirit makes possible things that had not been possible before.

In our world today, we speak many different languages. Even among those who speak English, language barriers can be powerful. It can be difficult to communicate with each other, especially when it comes to communicating the important things like the good news of Jesus Christ, or the love that binds us together.

The Holy Spirit honors our different languages and the experiences, environments, and influences that have led us to speak them. But the Holy Spirit also desires our unity. And so the Spirit makes it possible to communicate in love with each other across the divides between us.

As the church winds up this Easter Season and we celebrate Pentecost, the church year folds back into Ordinary Time. We might all be tempted to say, "Now what?" Now, in the ordinary days, through the quiet days of summer, is the time to open our eyes to the presence of the Holy Spirit and join in the ongoing work of crossing the language barriers in the church, in your home, in your workplace. The Holy Spirit is working to overcome divisions among us everyday as our advocate and our guide. Everyday, we can celebrate that.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, a reminder, if we need one, that all of our hopes and dreams will amount to little if the Spirit of God is not present among us. Just as the Holy Spirit came to the disciples on Pentecost, so too the Spirit is present for us. We need to be attentive, always listening and trying to discern the voice of God, continually seeking God's guidance and doing God's will. Whatever we seek to do as a church needs to meet one simple test. When we set out on new adventures, new projects, new ideas, we need to ask of ourselves just one question: Does what we are about to do honor God? If we can answer an enthusiastic "YES!" to that simple question, then we will know we are headed in the right direction.

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