

PENTECOST SUNDAY
LECTIONARY YEAR B

by Rev. Emily Chapman
May 31, 2009

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S
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Lectionary Texts:

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Romans 8:22-27; and John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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.'

I get the same image in my head every year around Pentecost. It is a picture that I colored in Sunday School when I was in about the first grade, I would guess. It's a picture of a birthday cake, with a couple of candles on it that says "Happy Birthday Church." I knew that Pentecost was the church's birthday, but I had never heard of these tongues of fire (at least not that I can remember) and certainly don't remember being told that everyone thought the people were drunk. All I knew was that we got to have a birthday party to celebrate the Church. And what a great birthday celebration we have here. The Church has been celebrating the day of Pentecost for centuries.

In Italy, it was customary to scatter rose petals from the ceiling to symbolize the tongues of fire. In France, trumpets blasted to symbolize that mighty rushing wind of the holy spirit. In some churches, people brought green tree branches as symbols of new life. In the Eastern Church, Pentecost is one of the main feast days of the Church, second only to Easter. I had never thought of Pentecost as such a big deal, worthy of all this fanfare, until I thought about what happened — what happened was a miracle — there should be trumpets blowing, huge celebrations. We should all be having a hard time staying in our seats, ready at any moment to jump up and shout for JOY.

Look what has happened. All of these people that come from places we cannot pronounce and could not possibly find on a map are speaking and understanding, are worshipping together, giving birth to this new community of believers, this Church that will be the body of Christ for the world. Now, having spent my week at a gathering of church leaders, I can tell you that it is indeed a MIRACLE for all of these people not only to all speak, but to listen and to understand.

The Church today does not seem to have the tongues of fire and are rarely full of people praising God in different languages. In fact, eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings continues to be the most segregated hour of the week in this country. Most churches are full of people from the same sorts of places and the same kind of backgrounds — not quite like the image from Acts. Remember when you listen to the laundry list of hard-to-pronounce places, that while we hear it that way, the people in

the book of Acts would have heard not a list, but a symbol of the entirety of the whole world from East to West, with Jerusalem in the middle, a fulfillment of the promise that the word of God would spread to the corners of the earth and then it was for ALL people in ALL places. Talk about a miracle. It was so exciting that the apostles are accused of being drunk....at nine in the morning.

I haven't seen too many churches in worship that I would accuse of drunkenness. Most churches seem committed to sobriety. While there is much work to be done as Christians in the world that will require sober judgment and action, we are a far cry from these tongues of fire and unrestrained enthusiasm. For the most part, I think it is safe to say that we come here week after week, not because we are filled with wonder and amazement, but because it is what we have been taught is right, or because we want to see our friends, or because we need to come here to sustain us for the rest of week. We come to rest and reflect, to try to make sense of the world around us. None of these are bad reasons to come to church. But then what do we do on this day of Pentecost? What do well-behaved and reasonable people do with this picture of the church?

I think there are many answers to this question, but one of them is to see it as a promise of what is to come. The end of the church on earth will be like the beginning. In Revelation, John gives us a picture of a great multitude, clothed in white, from every tribe and nation praising the Lord together when God's Kingdom comes in its fullness. It's pretty similar to this story of the church's birth. So perhaps we see what God's desire is for us and what God has promised the church – that ALL will be raised to new life in Christ.

Though we might not look it all the time, the Spirit is constantly at work in the Church, trying to overflow it and give new life. I think most of us would agree that the Church is an institution that could use some new life. I know that many of you have gone through periods where you left the church, were disappointed by it, even angered. As wonderful and vibrant a community as we have here, there are tales of gloom and doom from every side about the failings of the Church. We are often accused of being irrelevant and out of touch, a dying institution. Studies show that

religion is being left for dead by growing numbers of people in North America and Europe. But let's remember what God does with things that are left for dead.

One of the Lectionary texts we didn't read, but that is assigned for this week, comes from the prophet Ezekiel — and it's just too good a story to pass up.

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit

within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.”¹

We look and feel sometimes like a valley of dry bones. In our own lives, we are worn out and weary. We are burdened with worries, we struggle in our relationships, we fall short of being the people we want to be and the people God wants us to be, we feel cut off completely.

The Church is the same way. We grow weary as a church, we hesitate to open the doors and reach out because we are afraid of the change it may bring, we are tired, dried up, we have forgotten where our hope lies.

But look what God can do to these dried-up bones, with these tired spirits. The Spirit of God comes, and bone joins to bone, flesh comes upon these dry bones and breath enters them and they get up....tongues of fire fall from the sky, opening them to a new world and new life together. This day, this celebration of Pentecost is the celebration of the resetting of a body of broken bones, of the breath of God entering people...people who thought the Body of Christ had left this world only to find that they, and we, have become the body of Christ for the world.

I will put my spirit in you, and you shall live, says the Lord. Let it be so for us.
Amen.

¹Ezekiel 37:1-14