*Sermon for the First Sunday of Pentecost, Year A*

*28 May 2023*

*St. Matthew’s Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit*

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

"*When the day of Pentecost had come, the apostles 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.*”

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Given the spiritual magnitude of Pentecost, it’s fascinating how almost abrupt the Scriptures’ description of Pentecost actually is. Just four sentences.

I wonder what you have been taught about the Holy Spirit…what to expect, pray, and hope for. Think about it for a moment.

Maybe when you think about the Holy Spirit you think about something happening during the Eucharist or baptism. Maybe when you think about the Spirit you think of people speaking in tongues or miracles. Or maybe you don’t think about the Holy Spirit much at all.

You might remember last week, when we celebrated the Ascension, that I mentioned that sometimes the Ascension has been understood as Christ’s “departure” out of human life into heaven.

Something similar could be said about the way we understand the Holy Spirit. If Christ is said to ascend “away” from normal, bodily life, we might have come to think that the Spirit’s purpose is to transport us away from normal, bodily life, too, … and, so bring us somewhere else, perhaps, to some higher or more advanced state of personal or social experience.

The other way the Ascension is sometimes *misunderstood* is by seeing Jesus’ departure from the world in terms of God’s abandonment of the world, seeing his work “done.” Maybe you see the sending of the Holy Spirit along these lines: the Spirit did something exciting during Pentecost but… that was the end of it.

If the Spirit doesn’t lead us away from normal, bodily life, nor, does it mean that Christ’s work in the world is over, how should we see the Spirit’s *ongoing* presence in our lives?

…

Let’s start by looking at what was happening during this scene in Acts. In the book of Acts, the Spirit’s arrival is marked by the presence of wind, fire, and a sound that filled the room the disciples were in. When God appeared to Israel in the Old Testament, He often did so with these signs: wind, fire, and sound. But, it was at Mt. Sinai, where Moses received the Law from God, that all of these appear together at the same time: wind, fire, sound, …and the divine word.

Just like at Sinai, wind, fire, sound, and word come together here at Pentecost. In Acts, we read that, “*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*” Then, we see that the people gathered were amazed, because each of them heard in their “native language.” The Bible does not say exactly *what* the people heard, so the emphasis seems to fall *not* on the precise content of their utterances. The miracle, rather, seems to simply be that they heard the same *word*, which united them despite the diversity of languages present. So, the miracle of Pentecost is not just about the speech the Spirit provokes… rather, the miracle seems equally focused on the ear, on *hearing* the Spirit’s voice*.*  The disciples are invited as those who wait on the Spirit, to *speak* what the Spirit says, and to *hear* what the Spirit says. In other words, they are made to be those who *respond…* as those re-born by the Spirit’s inscriptions on them,… his “writing” of Christ on their lives, especially in the form of their shared life together.

The Scripture’s comparison of the Spirit to the “wind” indicates the Spirit’s absolute power and uncontrollability. The Spirit isn’t subjected to the any others’ wills, desires, or ambitions, because he is God. The Spirit is centered, though, on Christ’s continued work among the nations, so he cannot be quarantined in Jerusalem. And, so, it is *us*, the disciples, who are caught up in the Spirit’s “gale-force,” as it were, as we are made “witnesses” among the nations.

The Spirit’s inspiration of “language,” though, might lead us to think that the Spirit’s presence is a rather “heady” business. But language is an incredible thing. Language runs through voices, sounds, memories of peoples, lands, and places, which is to say…that what the Spirit provokes runs through *whole persons*. And, we have them all here: Jews from every nation, amazed and astonished, though some doubting: Galileans, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phyrgia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and some visitors from Rome. Israel, judged and dispersed among the nations, is here re-made, just as Jesus prayed in John 17 (21-24): “*that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me*… *and have loved them even as you have loved me*.”

All creatures, all lands, nations, tribes, languages, and peoples, are here gathered in worship of the One True God of Israel. This action begins with the people of Israel, young and old. Then the Spirit moves outward to the others, the Gentiles, who come to share the same story and faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, revealed in Christ. This is not God’s “imposition” on the nations; rather, each “receives” that is, specifically, “hears” of God’s powerful deeds in the intimacy of their own language.

God has called Israel and its children, and other children and their children and makes them witnesses through the Spirit’s power. This doesn’t mean, though, that everyone will receive their message (Acts 2:40). Because the Spirit continues to present Christ, what is revealed in them, in their encounters with the world, includes Christ’s contrariness to it. We are to be “witnesses,” those set apart, to bring the Gospel to everyone.

Just like the disciples at the Ascension, we do not stop waiting on and obeying the Spirit’s given-word. And, that message that the Spirit gives at Pentecost is the good news; the form of Christ himself… and his Cross. The Spirit does not leave the Cross behind or replace it with something else. And, so, the disciples’ message is sometimes seen as an offensive one… this message about this power made perfect in weakness, this Cross. … which remains, as Paul said, “a s*tumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*” (1 Cor 24-25).

But, in coming to us in this way, Christ has shown us just the way that God has bound himself to the world in love, to our humanity, our fragility, …even in the face of our rejection of him, he goes to the Cross. And, likewise, such is the form of all “spiritual gifts,” those that bind us to God and each other in his Body. Hence the radical sharing of possessions we see later in Acts Ch. 2… the Spirit simply enables them to *love* one another, and so share a common life, through their allegiance to Jesus.

So, we *can* know the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is present when we contemplate Christ crucified and risen. We come to know the Spirit to be amidst us… in the way He transforms us in the act of worshipping Christ over time and makes us to be “like him.”

…

You’ll recall how last week, Jesus instructed his disciples at the Ascension to “wait” for the Holy Spirit. We might expect that the disciples’ waiting and looking for him would stop once the Spirit comes at Pentecost, but it doesn’t. The disciples continue to look for Christ, in their lives, in the shape of their *shared* life together, and in the world.

As I said earlier, the event of Pentecost is only briefly narrated in Scripture; but, perhaps, this is on purpose.

For, the story of the Spirit of Christ is one into which we, the Church, are implanted, that is, we are made part of Christ’s ongoing life through the Spirit. *And, this,* Christ’s story, is one that goes on in the form of each of our lives, including our shared life at St. Matthew’s. Your life, is that which makes vivid the on-going reality of Pentecost. You *are* the recipient of the Spirit’s word. Your ears, voice, hands, and feet, the Spirit’s adopted organs. So, wait, yes, in hopeful expectation of the Lord, *pray*, and ask that the Spirit would come and speak *into* you and *through* you… so that you might become a “witness” to all of these things, … that you might receive the Spirit and so become fully human. …become, like Christ!

Amen.