

Pentecost Sunday, Sunday, May 15, 2016, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Acts2:1-11

“True Power”

For a first-century Jew, Pentecost was the fiftieth day after Passover. It was an agricultural festival, known as the “Feast of Weeks” or “Shavuot.” Well, I struggled with this; it is a day – so how do you have a festival of weeks? So I did a little digging; you see 7 weeks after Passover, 49 days plus one equals 50 days. It is the seven weeks after Passover that Shavuot was celebrated. Farmers brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop and then offered it to God, as a sign of gratitude and as a prayer that the rest of their crop would be safely gathered in, and so they offered the first fruits of their labors. But, for the Jew, neither Passover nor Pentecost were simply agricultural festivals. These festivals recalled echoes of the great story of the Exodus from Egypt, when God fulfilled His promises to Abraham by rescuing His people, through Moses.

During Passover perfect lambs were sacrificed, and the Israelites were saved from ‘the angel of death’, who killed the firstborn of the Egyptians, passing over the Israelites who escaped that very night, and passed and then they through the Red Sea into the Sinai Desert. Fifty days after Passover, they were led by God to Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Law from God Himself. Pentecost, the fiftieth day, isn’t just about the ‘first fruits’ of the harvest, but it is about God giving to His redeemed people the way of life by which they must now carry out His purposes. You know the old saying “God has a plan” – when we read this stuff – they didn’t happen by accident. God had mapped out, even to the day, what He wanted His people to know about and to recall.

Jesus just moments before Jesus’ Ascension to the Father from the Mount of Olives, made His Apostles this promise and gave them this charge: “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8) The Day of Pentecost, ten days after Jesus’ Ascension, is the day when Jesus’ promise to them is fulfilled and the Apostles are filled with the Holy Spirit; He came upon the Apostles with tongues of fire, empowering and emboldening them for the work of ministry. The children are receiving their own “tongues of fire” this morning. You will see them when they come back – it is going to be pretty cool!

Jesus promised them power, and the Greek word for power **δύναμις** (dunamis). Dunamis is where we get the words dynamic and dynamite – strong power – and the wind that blew upon the Apostles was not a gentle breeze but “*a violent wind*” or in other words “*a powerful wind.*” Some translations call it “*a mighty, rushing wind*” – the word “*might*” is often connected with the word “*power.*” This is also the fulfillment of the promise from John the Baptist who said “*I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” (Luke 3:16) The Apostles were given power from the Holy Spirit and fire! A refiners fire!

The Day of Pentecost is called by many ‘the official beginning of the Christian Church’ – or ‘the birthday of the church.’ But the coming of the Holy Spirit was not just for those first disciples of Jesus, it is for all who will profess Christ as Lord. The Apostles were bearing a most powerful witness to Jesus and his resurrection, which was resulting, that day in their winning 3,000 souls to Christ. When you come to think about it – the Day of Pentecost is like a sign of the “first fruits” of the church offered to God as a symbol of the great harvest that would come.

When we speak of the Holy Spirit, we aren’t speaking about merely ‘a force’ or ‘some divine energy’; we are speaking about a Person; the third Person of the Trinity. Jesus said, on the night before He died, that *“when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.”* (John 16:13) Notice that Jesus didn’t say, “it” but “He.” In the Book of Acts when the Apostle Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit, he uses a personal pronoun. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is a Person and the Holy Spirit is God. That’s why Paul tells us not to grieve the Holy Spirit. You can’t grieve a force or energy source, but you can grieve a person!

Jesus told Nicodemus in answer to his question about how he could be ‘born again’ in John 3:5-7 Jesus said: *“I tell you the truth; no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’”* There must be a spiritual rebirth! And the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:3 *“Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”* So do you want to know whether or not the Holy Spirit is in you? There is a simple test: Is Jesus your Lord? If Jesus is your Lord, then the Holy Spirit is in you. You have had a spiritual rebirth if you recognize and follow Christ as your Lord. But while the Holy Spirit is in you, the more important question is does the Holy Spirit lead and guide you? Are you led by the Holy Spirit? Most people in our world today and there are even many in the Church, who are living a life that is not controlled by the Holy Spirit. They are, in fact, out of control and led by another spirit – not the Spirit of God! You see either the Holy Spirit is in control of your life or He isn’t. And if He isn’t, then it means your human nature is in control. What the Bible calls “the flesh” – is our natural inclination, that ‘in born craving’ inside each one of us to do that which is wrong, to do what the Bible calls “sin.”

What are the characteristics of the one who is being controlled by the flesh? Please turn with me to page 1812 in your Pew Bibles, to Galatians 5:19-21 *“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.”* This list isn’t meant to be a complete list, it’s meant to give us some examples of when the flesh is in control. And what is the result?

- Wasted time,
- warped thoughts,
- weakened bodies,
- and wrecked lives.

That's what happens when the flesh is in control. But please, be encouraged as we now look on the very same page at what Paul says what will be true if the Holy Spirit is in control – and this is good news! Look at Galatians 5:22-23 “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance (which means patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*” Do you want to know if you are being controlled by the Holy Spirit? These will be true of your life. These are the Fruit of the Spirit.

That incredible day of Pentecost, and the experience of God's Holy Spirit from that day till now is a never ending demonstration of God's power and love, which can transform a listless or lifeless believer into someone whose heart is 'on fire' with the love of God. Those images of a violent wind and fire are an amazing view of God's power being given to believers of Jesus Christ. The Hebrew word for wind is 'Ruach', and amazingly enough 'Ruach' is also the word for Spirit. The Holy Wind, the Holy Spirit – the “*Ruach Ha Kadesh*” brought power, confidence and boldness to the disciples- and they would never be the same again! The whole point is that, through the Holy Spirit, some of the power of God Himself comes from heaven to earth, transforming the earth with the power of heaven, starting with the bodies, minds, hearts and lives of the followers of Jesus - all together in one place. Just as Jesus promised in Acts 1:8 – the Apostles would receive power – the power of heaven. The Holy Spirit comes, not to divide, but to unite. Those Disciples in the Upper Room that had been hiding for 50 days – suddenly became totally different. If you keep reading that chapter – the second chapter of Acts – the Apostles leave that place and they start to preach to people. Peter has an amazing message; three thousand people come to the Lord that day!

The gift of the Holy Spirit transformed them, giving the direct result, or the first fruits of the ascension of Jesus Christ. Because He is the Lord of all, His energy, His power, is available through the Holy Spirit to all who call on Him, all who follow Him, and all who trust Him. The wind and the fire are wild, untamable forces, and the experience of the powerful wind rushing through that house with a great roar, and the fire coming to rest on each person present, must have been both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. There are also many times when the Holy Spirit works softly and secretly, quietly transforming people's lives and situations without any big noise or fuss. In today's reading from the second chapter of Acts, Luke shows us how a small group of frightened, puzzled and largely uneducated men and women could so quickly become, as they undoubtedly did, “a force to be reckoned with” throughout the known world. An amazing transformation!

There was also the strange phenomenon of 'speaking in tongues.' Miraculously, on that Day of Pentecost, no one needed translators. Jerusalem is filled to the brim with people from all over, speaking all sorts of languages. Everybody understood in their own language. What language would they have been expecting? At that time, all around the Mediterranean world, everybody's second language and written language was Greek. Ever since the conquests of Alexander the Great, 400 years earlier, Greek had been for much of that world what English is for many people today. People who travelled, as the people in this account seem to have done, would pretty certainly be able to get by in Greek, but they probably spoke at least one other language,

if not two or three. Jews in Jerusalem and surrounding Israel would know, and usually speak, Aramaic, and some might know and be able to read classical Hebrew in the scrolls of the Torah. People might know some Latin, since Rome had taken over many of the countries that had been originally conquered by the Greeks.

On that Day of Pentecost they didn't need to switch languages, or need translators. It was all done for them by the Holy Spirit, miraculously. People are often surprised by this, because many have seen 'the gift of tongues' not as the gift of being able to speak other specific languages, but instead as the gift of a kind of heavenly babble, a conglomeration of syllables and sounds which might sound like a language, but does not appear to be either to the person speaking or to any of the listeners. For many devout Christians who 'speak in tongues' as part of their prayer language, they don't expect that anyone will 'understand' what is said. There are many well documented instances of people 'speaking in tongues' suddenly, by the Holy Spirit, and not knowing that that there is someone present who can understand and interpret them.

I have no explanation for this other than that God can do whatever God wants to do, and that it isn't up to us to set limits on what God can do, as He is reaching out when the Gospel needs to make an impact on someone, or some group of people. This supernatural phenomenon points to something else that is going on that day in Jerusalem. God was revealing how He was going to fulfill what He had said to Abraham in Genesis 12.3: *'In you, and in your family, all the families of the earth will be blessed.'* Blessed to be a blessing! This remarkable promise to Abraham comes right after the incredible event in which the people of Babel are building a tower, arrogantly trying to make a name for themselves. God responds to their pride and arrogance by overturning their project and confuses their languages so that they cannot understand one another and their society is in shambles. On that day of Pentecost that curse of Babel is overturned; God dramatically shows that His promises to Abraham are being fulfilled, and the whole human race is going to be able to hear the good news of what has happened in and through Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ.

People had come from all over, from countries each with their own native language and local dialects. Luke gives the list of where they came from, covering tens of thousands of square miles, from Parthia and Mesopotamia in the north and from the east to Rome in the west and Egypt and Arabia in the south, even with the island of Crete. The point is not to give an exact list of where everyone came from in that crowded city of Jerusalem that day, but to give us the sense of great wonder as people were hearing words spoken in their own native language. To some it sounded simply like the slurred and babbling speech of people who have had too much to drink.

What happened that day is an undeniably remarkable, inexplicable display of repentance and faith, with people receiving Christ. Repentance and faith aren't just something that you do when you are saved, they are necessary each and every day if we are to be led by the Holy Spirit. Repentance is God's way of revealing "myself to me," and faith is God's way of revealing Himself, who He is, Jesus Christ to me.

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- In repentance God shows me my sin;
- In faith God shows His Grace and His Glory.

You know fruit is meant to be eaten. It satisfies both our thirst and our hunger. When we say yes to the Holy Spirit, when we are willing to be led within the Spirit's parameters, when we continue in repentance and faith, we will come to that place where we will not only be disciplined, but we will be satisfied. For no one is ever "more free" than the one who is living a life controlled by the Holy Spirit. But it is up to us to take that step in the first place.

And now to God be the glory; in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.