

The Ongoing Birthday of the Church

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

May 23, 2021—The Day of Pentecost

- Luke 24:44-53 (Good News Translation) ⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are the very things I told you about while I was still with you: everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms had to come true.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, “This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later, ⁴⁷ and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ “And I myself will send upon you what my Father has promised. But you must wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you.” ⁵⁰ Then he led them out of the city as far as Bethany, where he raised his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ As he was blessing them, he departed from them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² They worshiped him and went back into Jerusalem, filled with great joy, ⁵³ and spent all their time in the Temple giving thanks to God.

A few weeks ago we heard from Chapter 1 of the Acts of the Apostles that in the days after that first Easter, the followers of Jesus numbered about 120 persons. That 120 including the twelve apostles, Mary the mother of Jesus, and other women and men. They had followed and learned from Jesus. They suffered through witnessing his torture and crucifixion. They were told that Jesus had been raised from death to new life, and a few had face-to-face encounters with the Risen Christ until he ascended to heaven forty days after the resurrection.

So what were Christ’s followers to do next? From the resurrected Jesus they learned that they should wait until they received what he called “the power from above.”¹ So the believers spent much of this “waiting time” together. Since they were Jewish, often the believers continued to go to the logical place for worship and prayer, the Jerusalem Temple. There they offered prayers of praise and thanks for the blessing of knowing Jesus. Unlike other Jews in the temple, the followers of Jesus knew him to be the Son of the Heavenly Father.

The Bible story for this day takes place ten days after Christ’s ascension into heaven, which would be fifty days after the Jewish Passover and that first Easter. This fiftieth day coincided with a Jewish festival celebrating the spring harvest. We know that harvest festival as Pentecost, from the Greek word for “fifty days.”

The Pentecost festival on that particular year was unique. The Bible’s story about it has drama, mystery, humor, devotion. How would *you* try to describe the experience of divine inspiration, passionate conviction, motivation to share life-changing news? Luke was the fellow who wrote one of the gospels as well as this book of the Acts of the Apostles. Here’s how Luke described that particular year’s Pentecost festival:

¹ When Pentecost Day arrived, they [the followers of Jesus] were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

Pentecost was a “pilgrimage feast,” meaning that Jews who lived outside Jerusalem and the surrounding Judean countryside were encouraged to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem if

¹ Luke 24:49 Good News Translation

possible. That's why Jerusalem was filled with Jewish pilgrims from many different lands who spoke various languages. Here's how Luke describes their reaction to whatever it was that had come over those followers of Jesus:

⁵There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. ⁷They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? ⁸How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), ¹¹Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!"

If you were to look at an ancient map of that time, you'd quickly notice that the list of Jewish pilgrims returning to Jerusalem came from lands that surrounded Israel. The believers – the followers of Jesus – on the other hand, were almost exclusively from the Galilee region in northern Israel, and Galileans were "notorious for their lack of linguistic talent."² The Jewish pilgrims to Jerusalem couldn't believe that these followers of Jesus had been inspired to speak seemingly every language of the world. Indeed, Luke describes the pilgrim's reaction:

¹²They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" ¹³Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!"

Accusing them of drunkenness was a convenient insult to explain something that defied explanation. How would the followers of Jesus react to that insult? Ignore it? Respond by bad-mouthing the out-of-towners? Who would speak for them?

Peter. Peter, the apostle with the reputation for being impulsive and outspoken. Peter, the apostle who said he would never betray Jesus, but then on the night that Jesus was arrested, Peter denied being acquainted with him – denied him *three times*. Yes, *that* Peter spoke to the curious, suspicious Jewish pilgrims gathered in the streets below. Here's how Luke described it (I've edited this for brevity):

¹⁴Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! ¹⁵These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! ¹⁶Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷*In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young will see visions.
Your elders will dream dreams....*

²¹*And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved....*

³⁶"Therefore, let all Israel know beyond question that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Peter explained that what centuries of Jewish prophets had envisioned had finally come to pass: God empowered and encouraged the believers through the gift of God's Holy Spirit. The Spirit confirmed the gift of faith in God which they knew because of their trust in Jesus as their Master and Savior.

² New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X: Acts – 1 Corinthians. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 55

So, how would this turn out? Could people still “hop on the bandwagon” of faith in God by accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior? Was it too late for others join with the believers? Luke captured the crowd’s yearning. Listen:

³⁷ When the crowd heard this, they were deeply troubled. They said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”

³⁸ Peter replied, “Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away – as many as the Lord our God invites.”

Luke concluded this episode by reporting that about 3,000 people responded to the invitation.

Now, what’s the significance of this event so long ago and so far away?

Think about this. Except for a few infants in this church, everyone else has observed a birthday at some point in the past year. So, what do we do when celebrating a birthday? Do we focus solely on our date of birth, recalling the experience surrounding our arrival in this world: hearing tales of the onset of labor, the drive to the hospital, the delivery, the first night spent at home with mommy and daddy? No. We don’t focus solely on what happened on one date long ago. On our birthdays we celebrate who we are now, what we’ve come through, the possibilities that lay ahead of us.

I’m thinking about our birthdays because Pentecost is often called “the birthday of the Church.” By that people mean that the earliest followers of Jesus came to realize God’s gift of the Holy Spirit empowered and encouraged them. The Holy Spirit enabled them to share the good news of the gospel in word and deed... which is the purpose of the church.

Oh, yes, we derive comfort and inspiration from worshiping, and we love the joy of sharing fellowship and friendships in the church. But those features are cherished by-products of being called together as disciples. Our main mission, our calling as disciples of Jesus is to share the good news of God’s love by presenting Jesus through what we do and say: what we’ve done, who we are now, and what we’ll do in the future. Being a model, a witness, an example of Jesus is the Christian’s calling that was born on the Day of Pentecost. Testifying to the joy of belonging to Jesus is what we’re called to do yet today.

And realize that you’re not in this alone.

Notice that God’s Spirit is poured out on a collection of believers. “The Holy Spirit is not a ‘personal’ gift from God that each believer privatizes,” says biblical professor Robert Wall. The fact that the Spirit appeared to a group is “the distinguishing mark of a *people* belonging to God.”³

God poured out the Holy Spirit to the collection of believers. I’m not gifted by the Spirit, and you’re not gifted by the Spirit; together we all are blessed by God’s Holy Spirit, to use it for the common good, as St. Paul affirmed in 1 Corinthians Chapter 12.

So though you may be sitting in a pew by yourself, you are not alone. God has blessed and is blessing this church – us, you and me and them – blessing us to minister to our community and the world with words and actions that offer comfort, support, hope, well-being, peace.

The Day of Pentecost began in the church’s history – it began the history of the church! – but it was not a one-and-done kind of event. You and I have been called to continue the ministry that began centuries and centuries ago: testifying to the power of God in Jesus Christ to save our lives from hopelessness and futility, testifying to God’s power in Jesus to give us new life in this world and the next.

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³ <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/93041305> accessed 5/11/2021