

“The Early Days of the Church”
Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost, May 15, 2016
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Home for Pentecost? Did you ever think of that saying? Home for Pentecost? We're familiar with the words, "are you going home for Christmas?" That's almost taken on the all American Christian ionic phrase, home for Christmas. But home for Pentecost? Most of us have a hard time even figuring out when Pentecost is going to fall in the church calendar. Let alone knowing whether or not if we're going to be home and in church for Pentecost. Making it home for the celebration of the birthday of the church? It's sort of the forgotten church holiday. One of the reasons is probably because it hasn't caught on with the commercial American culture. There are no Pentecost gifts we can go and buy like Pentecost clothes except for something red that we might have on this morning. What's the gift to give for Pentecost?

We should rejoice that it is one of the Christian holidays that's not been taken over by the culture and still has its full religious meaning...whatever that might be, right? What does it mean to be at church on Pentecost? We talk about the birthday of the church and that's nice. But what is this Pentecost really about?

Luke writes in Acts 20:16: "Paul ... was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost." Isn't that curious that he wanted to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost? It wasn't because they were having a birthday party because the whole idea of the birthday of the church hadn't taken form yet. No, I think he wanted to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost as a reminder of the coming of the Holy Spirit. As a reminder of the power that God had unleashed that day in sending the Holy Spirit to be forever with us.

We had a dove flying through the sanctuary as we began the service to remind us of the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Spirit. Some theologians say that Pentecost is one of the great three great theological moments when God reached down and did something spectacular. One being the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Someone who was dead, who is now alive and back among his followers.

The third one is Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. When we are empowered to go out and be not only disciples but apostles of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So what would the other great occasion be? It's the one between Easter and Pentecost.

It is the Day of Ascension, when one who was dead became alive again and then God raised that one up to heaven who we believe to sit on the right hand of the Father where he reigns with God forever more. No one had ever been brought back from the dead before. Only Elijah had been taken directly to heaven.

The three great actions of God that show God's power and God's strength. It shows how God wants to empower us. Who we were visioned to be by God when we first appeared, you and I, I am talking about on this planet earth.

It happened just like all the other occasions in a very unspectacular way. Luke says, "when the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place." Now, you might ask, what place was it, where were they? The scripture is not helpful about that particular fact; it was surely in Jerusalem, maybe on the Temple grounds where there was a crowd of people. One tradition states they were in the large upper room where they had celebrated the last supper with Jesus seven weeks before. I like that idea ... it was early morning and Peter was preaching to about 120 people, including the 11 apostles. Shortly thereafter they must have moved out into the huge Temple courtyard for 3000 people later responded to Peter's call.

As Peter was preaching, Luke writes, "Suddenly there came a loud sound as the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting." How about that for preaching! And, "There appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on of each one of them." I remember the Pentecost here when we brought a cake down the aisle for the Children's Message with about 70 lighted candles. More than a few of us thought something more than candles might catch on fire that day! I think fire is mentioned here to indicate the presence of God.

It had been seven weeks since Jesus died, and only ten days since he ascended into heaven. That's hardly enough time to file all the papers, let alone absorb what had happened, or to decide what to do next. All of us who have experienced the death of a loved one knows that the first ten days or the first seven weeks, can be lost in a cloud of darkness. "I can't remember what happened," she told me, "all I know is that I acted too quickly. I should have waited before I sold everything." They would have been mourning. They had not only lost the Lord, but they had also lost the meaning of their lives.

Then, all of a sudden one Sunday morning at about 9:00 o'clock something new and marvelous happened. It was just a regular church service, really. Not many people expect much to happen at a worship service. Hardly ever. They gathered to sing a few songs and hear a sermon, meeting some friends, and pray a few prayers. "Hey Luke, let's go over to hear what the preacher has to say..." A lot of worship has a kind of ho-hum sameness about it. I don't know if even Simon Peter had all that great an expectation at the 9 o'clock service that morning. Jewish worship of the day was more patterned: recited prayers and antiphonal songs, long, even tiresome, unfocused.

But, before they knew it, the dark and dreary clouds were blown away in the rush of a mighty wind. The fog of their grief was burned off in an instant by the fingers of fire. Life changes quickly, one way or the other. They were new, restored, and ready to go up the next step to a new life. Praise the Lord.

The story is meant to convey power. Luke writes that when the fire came down, there were, as it were, 120 tongues of fire, like little fingers, one pointing to each person. There are hidden meanings here. It could be symbolic. But something mighty and magnificent occurred as the

group of followers, still tiptoeing through the minefield of their grief, suddenly were renewed and redirected with the gift of the spirit of power, like dynamite. It changed them, it renewed their courage and it got them going. Like you have heard some people say, "I am going to light a fire under you to get you going." God did that day.

I am not surprised or shocked by how they reported it. Individual tongues of fire, meant not for everyone, but one by one. I see it happening all the time. God's blessing is everywhere for everyone. But it is not a blessing en masse, not one loud shout and message for the whole congregation. He speaks to the individuals gathered in his name, one by one. Someone wrote to me a few weeks ago, "I thought you were speaking directly to me last Sunday." I often hear that. Sometimes I wonder what part of the sermon touched them, for others mention other parts. Sometimes, someone mentions something I never even said. It happens because God can translate into the language of your soul. What you need he will give to you, if you open up your heart.

Luke goes on to say that after the fire and the wind had come, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." They were overpowered and enchanted, so filled by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, that they blurted out all kinds of noise in what sounded like strange languages. Maybe the primal memory carries on. Who knows? I am told that sometimes people revert to their earliest language when it comes to prayer and trouble and ecstasy.

Next, Luke records a strange and even humorous comment from the crowd. With all this shouting and hollering and speaking in tongues, some pondered it religiously, but many others mocked and said, "They are filled with new wine." In other words, they are drunk. Peter stood up to continue his sermon. He began, "Listen to me," he said. "These men cannot be drunk. It is only the third hour of the day. It is only 9 o'clock in the morning." No one but the real hardcore drinkers start drinking that early.

So, your question and mine might be, "What happened?" How did that ragamuffin crowd of a few, literally a few, followers pull it off? I add for your perusal the following. They came to believe that the one who had been crucified had risen from the dead! What happened and however unfocused are the various reports in the Gospels and St. Paul, there can be no question that his followers came to believe that he was back with them. He had risen; he was alive; he was there! Now, ponder the unbelievable power in that. A friend once told me that once you think you are going to die, nothing is ever the same again. True. But not so true as what happens when you come to believe that one, who was dead, has come back to life again. They were never the same!

Originally Acts 1 tells us there were about 120 persons, comprised of the Galilean Apostles and friends who apparently came down to Jerusalem to join the believers who were already there. They were all together in prayer and worship. They listened to the Apostles teaching, and they shared a common meal once a week.

At first, while there was no officially elected leader; Simon Peter appears to have been in charge. He had been close to Jesus. He had seen the Risen Lord in a private appearance, and he seems to

have been a natural leader. Later, however, Peter seems to have surrendered his prominent position in Jerusalem at least, to James, the brother of Jesus. A peculiar choice, for while Jesus was alive, the only appearance of James was the time he joined his other brothers and tried to persuade Jesus to quit his ministry and to stop claiming that he was the Messiah. James' reversal, apparently after the death and resurrection of the Lord, was fortuitous for he seems to have been one of good practical leadership, which was lacking in the more spontaneous style of Simon Peter.

For 20 years James was the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem Church. He helped to settle all kinds of arguments and was a master of compromise. At the Council of Jerusalem, e.g., it was he who satisfied both Paul and Peter about the subject of circumcision and the Jewish Rituals. But in 62 A.D. James was stoned to death.

Meanwhile, in 64 A.D., following a huge fire in Rome, the Emperor Nero, began his intense persecution of Christians, during which time, it appears both Peter and Paul were executed. There is no public record of these events but it seems a reasonable conclusion in the tradition of the church. Both were in Rome and both disappeared.

After the martyrdom of James, say from 62 A.D. to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. the church in Palestine seems to have been led by other brothers of the family of Jesus. But, it appears they continued to believe that the Messiah was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. They mostly took no interest in missions outside the Holy Land; and, they were opposed to the conversion of the Gentiles initiated by Paul, unless the converts first became Jews. It was Paul as you know who spread the faith across the Gentile Roman world.

The lessons of Pentecost are still lessons for us to follow today. One, the message of Pentecost is that God is ready to give you the power you need to live the Christian life. As he did to those early followers, he will send the Holy Spirit to guide and guard you in all matters of the faith. When the Spirit comes, it will give you power you need to do God's will, and to restore to you your zest and commitment to Christ and his church. Whatever troubles you, or blocks your way, the Spirit will remove it. The secret to their success was that the Spirit and Power of God controlled their every move. They had talents galore, but those did not matter. What really mattered is that they were men and women filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

And, the power of the Holy Spirit will come "suddenly," as it did at Pentecost. God does not spend his time and energy sending messages and alerts in advance to let us know when and where he will visit. You will get no e-mail, or tweet or telephone call. No, he comes in his own time and on his own schedule.

Paul's eagerness to "be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost," is a reminder to us busy church people that there is a need to get home for Pentecost, to return to the source who called us to the ministry of Jesus Christ in the first place. Home for Pentecost!

Until then, follow the early apostles: attend to your spiritual matters in prayer and scripture reading and help those who are suffering, then you will be ready when he comes. And live in the love of Jesus Christ.

