

Pentecost Sunday 2020
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
By Jim Lott

Happy Pentecost. We rarely if ever hear or say that. This is a feast day that lacks the cozy familiarity of Christmas and Easter. But what happened at Pentecost as Luke the author of Acts describes it is central – in fact essential - to our individual and communal lives as Christians.

The disciples come together in a room to celebrate Pentecost, a Jewish harvest festival held 50 days after Passover. It has been ten days since the Ascension, and the post-Easter Jesus, their resurrected leader and friend who was with them for 40 days, is gone. Vanished into the clouds. Ascension was a marvelous moment, no doubt, but the disciples must have thought of it not so much as an ascension as a withdrawal: they must have felt abandoned despite the fact that Jesus had promised to send the comforter to them. But they did keep going; they stayed together as a group, even choosing someone to take the place of Judas, Jesus' betrayer. They waited. Surely, they yearned for the holy presence they had felt in Jesus. And then on Pentecost they gathered together to observe a festival they had known since they were children. They must have wanted the consolation of being together and celebrating something familiar.

But what the disciples get is incredible disruption of the familiar. It begins with wind and noise and fire – such loud disruption of the familiar that other people come running to see what is happening – and it ends with the disciples speaking in languages they do not know and the visitors from all those other places with the exotic names being able to understand them. It is an episode that recalls in reverse the story in Genesis of the Tower of Babel (or “babble” perhaps) when God destroyed the tower and scattered all human kind apart into separate tribes with different languages. A story to explain not only why there are so many tongues and dialects but also why human beings are so prone to stick with their own kind and to suspect and despise those who are different from them.

In the Pentecost story, these divisions are erased and everyone speaks and hears clearly. Is the miracle in the speaking or in the hearing? Surely it is both. It is a moment of communication that breaks down human separations.

Well, except for those who do not have the ears – the inner ears – to hear, the skeptics who find a reason not to understand what should be clear to them. The skeptics’ reaction – expressed with a “sneer” - is that the disciples must be drunk. (It’s not clear why being drunk would bestow the ability to speak foreign languages, but the sneerer is going to find a reason even when the reason makes no sense.)

Several wonderful things happen at this point in the story, and they all have to do with Peter. He stands up and speaks. He has been transformed from the well-meaning but bumbling follower and betrayer of Jesus into an articulate spokesman for the Gospel message of God's presence and action in the world. He dismisses the skeptics (and does it with a display of humor that seems new to him): "These men can't be drunk. It's too early in the day!" He declares that the disciples' behavior is the result of God's Spirit described by the prophet Joel: the Spirit that gives power to the young to dream dreams and to the old to have visions. In the passage which follows the one we read today, Peter tells the story of the mission, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus and invites all the listeners – the perplexed and the skeptical – to be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit. And 3000 of them do so.

So what has happened here? And how does it relate to us, especially at this time of pandemic, racial hatred and violence, lies and cruelties, distrust and loss of certainty?

The story of Pentecost is a story about a mighty act of God. But it is also a story about human awakening to what already is and always has been and always will be: the living and life-giving presence of God. The wind and the fire did not bring the Holy Spirit: the wind and fire showed the disciples – in a way that could not be ignored – that God was present and yearned to bring them into oneness with

Him. What the wind and fire and speaking and hearing reveal to them is the answer to their unarticulated question: where is God? And the answer is “Where is He not?” He is everywhere and you feel Him at this moment in the wind and fire but He is always here. Moreover, those who experience His presence – those who have waited, those who have desired, those who have listened, those who have been redeemed from their sneering - know that to experience God’s presence is to experience also the oneness of all God’s creation.

These are bad times. It’s tempting to think that God has withdrawn. Covid 19 continues to devastate the physical health of millions and the mental and emotional health of billions. National political leaders elected to protect us have failed to do so, and instead of direction and comforting words we are daily subjected to the chaos of angry tweets and twitter. In the midst of the pandemic and the physical isolation it is imposing on us, we have seen racial hatred – America’s original sin – burst forth once more and we have seen the crucifixion yet again, this time with the cross replaced by the knee of a white policeman pressing into the neck of a black man and killing him. “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” The last words of Jesus. “I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.” The last words of George Floyd.

This is the kingdom of the world. It is the world of illness, bad faith, separation, violence. It exists along with and mixed with all that is good about the

world: beauty, kindness, love. It is the reality in which we must live our lives, and we can't ignore or deny it. But the simple and profound lesson of Pentecost is that there is a deeper reality. It is the reality of our spiritual selves, the core of our being where God receives us into union with Him. It is the center within which the Universal Christ, the manifested God, says to us, "It is I. Do not be afraid."

Pentecost is a noisy and joyous occasion and most years we respond joyously to it. But this year is different. We are fearful and tired and discouraged and we can't console or be consoled in person. Like the disciples after Ascension Day but before Pentecost, we are probably feeling in between, more likely to be feeling God's withdrawal than God's descent upon us. So like the disciples we need to wait and pray and yearn. And we also need to make phone calls and keep up with others with texts and emails and face time. And we need to support causes that work for social justice by sending them the money we would have used for eating out or taking a vacation. And we need to protest as we are able – on social media and elsewhere - the horrors confronting the poor and downtrodden, the victims of racism and gender prejudice. We need to wear our masks to protect others when we go into public places. We need to read scripture and reflect on God's will for us all. And above all we need to pray: for one another, for our society, for our world, for those we love and those we do not like, for ourselves. Every day without fail we need – literally need –to take time to sit quietly in God's

presence, in contemplative prayer if we feel drawn to that, or in whatever way helps us become more aware that God is with us now and always.

This is a low-key Pentecost, to be sure. But the message of Pentecost is clear: God is within us, at the core of our being, from the moment of our birth to the moment of our death, and beyond. God is among us: we are the Body of Christ in the world and we are always one even when not physically together. God is ever arriving and He is ever here. But He never departs. May God give us grace to welcome Him with joy even in our waiting.

Happy Pentecost.