

Pentecost

Acts of the Apostles 2:1-21

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27, 16:4-15

May 19, 2024

Holy Family Episcopal Church Laurel Springs, NJ

Let us pray:

Most gracious God, we are very grateful for the gifts that you give us, and we are especially thankful today for the gift of the Advocate, the Truth teller. Give us courage to tell our truths, Lord Christ, that will lead to a world filled with justice and love. Amen

Happy Pentecost, everyone! If you know anything about me, you know that I do not deny that Pentecost is my favorite church holy day. I'm never sure if it's because of all the red, which, of course, is my absolute favorite color, or the fact that as a child, we always celebrated it at Saint Mary's in Haddon Heights as the Church's birthday. And who doesn't love a birthday? Today is the day I get to do my best Oprah Winfrey impersonation, "You get a cupcake! And you get a cupcake! And you get a cupcake!" But more about that at coffee hour.

And celebrating Pentecost, or Whitsunday, as it was known back in the day, as the birthday of the church, is not that far off. The theology of the Episcopal Church tells us that Pentecost, which was 50 days after he rose from the dead and 10 days after Jesus ascended into heaven, in the presence of his apostles, was the day that the Holy Spirit descended upon them, with tongues of fire as described in our reading this morning from the Acts of the Apostles. Tongues of fire appeared above each of their heads, and they were able to speak in all the languages of the people who were gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. That's the Greek word for it- Fiftieth. The Jews refer to it as The Feast of Weeks or the Feast of the Harvest. This Jewish feast has been celebrated since Old Testament times and is mentioned five places in the Torah, the first five books of our Bible-Exodus 23 and 24, Leviticus 16, Numbers 28, and Deuteronomy 16. It was the celebration of the beginning of the early weeks of the harvest, during the months of May and June. It is for this reason that there were in Jerusalem, Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven, and why Jesus' followers had gathered together.

I have preached on Pentecost numerous times, but this is the first year that I have come to realize that significant events in the life and ministry of Jesus and the development of the early church coincide with Jewish feasts and holy days. I am not sure why this is, maybe it is because I spent at least four hours in synagogue last Saturday. The most notable is the Crucifixion of Christ and the Passover sacrifice when the lamb was offered. Now I realize

that Pentecost, the birth of the Church, and the coming of the Holy Spirit also occurred simultaneously with the Jewish Feast of Weeks. I don't know why I never made that connection before and I wanted to share my newfound insight with all of you this morning.

Our reading from the Gospel of John this morning is Jesus' last visit with his disciples, and he once again is reminding them of his imminent departure. He has been preparing them for his return to his Father since he initially called them together. Maybe it was simple denial, but it is genuinely curious as to why the disciples never quite seem to understand what the rabbi is imparting to them. Jesus also announced that after he leaves, they will not be alone because he is sending the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, from the Father to guide them in their continuing ministry. None of them say a word during this last teaching and Jesus acknowledges that their hearts are filled with sorrow. Jesus knows that his disciples do not understand what he is saying, and they do not want to hear any more about his leaving, they are still processing the horror of Good Friday. They were overwhelmed by his disappearance from the tomb, and then his reappearance to them when they were held up, terrified, in the upper room on Resurrection night. According to John's Gospel (John 20:22), that is when Jesus gives his disciples, the gift of the Holy Spirit, but the gospel writer continues and reassures them that God in his infinite wisdom and love will not leave them (or us for that matter) alone and terrified. Indeed, the Advocate is coming to provide them with the courage and strength to speak the truth about the saving life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

That is exactly what they do when they stand up before that crowd of 3000 gathered for The Feast of Weeks and speak in their own languages, describing God's mighty works. Then Peter stood up with the support of the other 11 and spoke out with bold urgency, explaining that they were indeed not drunk because it was so early in the day and describing what the Prophet Joel had announced, as what would happen in the Last Days.

We are living in a time in which truth-telling is as critical as ever. This Spirit of Truth has been given to every Christian disciple. The advocate continues to live in and among us, and many of us act as though we do not recognize the Spirit and do not know the Savior. The roaring sin of racism continues to run rampant through our nation and the world. The Spirit of Truth urges us to speak up with courage and to demand that the world be better. The Spirit was sent to help all of us to speak the truth into the world. Whenever and wherever we see injustice, we are duty-bound to address it. Remember, Jesus commands us to love one another.

Liturgically, the day of Pentecost completes the cycle that begins with Ash Wednesday and continues through Lent and Holy Week into Eastertide. It is the culmination of a liturgical journey that moved symbolically from ashes to fire. Pentecost sums up the gospel with simplicity and audacity: Jesus Christ offers salvation to all, and the church exists to proclaim it. Pentecost is an appropriate time for us to reaffirm our participation as disciples in the body of Christ, to challenge us to live into its promise and to celebrate the global witness of the church.

My siblings in Christ, on this feast of Pentecost, may we with gladness receive the holy and everlasting gift of the Advocate, who leads and guides us to be our very best selves. We can shine the light of Christ into this broken and hurting world because the Holy Spirit strengthens us. So proclaim the truth that Jesus Christ is alive and lives in us and loves us whenever and wherever people are hurting. Help those who do not yet know Christ discover that he loves them and will never abandon them. Let us lean on the Advocate, who will always provide us with the strength and courage we need to help heal this dark and broken world. Amen.