

## Sermon for the Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday

Readings: Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

Some years ago now, a friend occasionally would sing with the accompaniment of Malcolm Bilson, a musician known for his performances and recordings on the fortepiano. This 18<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> century instrument is the forerunner of the modern piano, the pianoforte, an instrument whose technological development, as I understand it, is due in part to the Industrial Revolution. She told me that if you listen to Beethoven's late piano sonatas played on a fortepiano, you can actually hear how Beethoven was stressing his instrument almost to and even beyond the breaking point, pushing beyond its known limits, forcing it to move beyond itself and to change. An instrument known primarily for its resonance evolved, as it were, to one known more for its power.<sup>1</sup> Even the name of these keyboard instruments reversed itself--from loud-soft (forte -piano) to soft-loud (piano-forte), illustrating the dramatic shift.

You might wonder why I begin with an illustration of an instrument many people have never heard of. But it strikes me as an illustration of what was happening at Pentecost. It would seem at Pentecost the transformation of frail disciples to Spirit-impelled witnesses happened instantaneously, but our gospel for today describes another visitation of the Holy Spirit on the evening of the Resurrection, as Jesus "breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" And then we read that after Jesus had ascended into heaven the disciples were mindful of his promises and "constantly devoting themselves to prayer." And in our gospel today, set on the evening of the Resurrection, we have a less dramatic and seemingly more intimate visitation of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus "breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"

We have lived again through Lent, Holy Week and Easter when Jesus made his way to Jerusalem, was crucified, and raised from the dead, just as he had promised and lived among

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<sup>1</sup> You can find Malcolm Bilson describing Beethoven's frustrations with the fortepiano in his lecture "Beethoven and the Piano" on youtube [<https://youtu.be/Y8l0yNCGGEs>]

them again for 40 days. But it has been our first such season in a generation-defining pandemic—an upheaval that none of us could have anticipated just a few months ago. How often in these past weeks have I prayed the prayer that begins “Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work or watch or weep this night,” goes through a litany of petitions for those who are suffering and dying, and concludes with what seems initially the surprising petition to “shield the joyous.” Most of us were shielded from knowing what was ahead – an example of God’s protection. But now that we are living through this unanticipated time, what is Pentecost for us now? Are we perceiving the power of God at work in our lives, pushing us beyond our limits, enabling us to learn and to communicate in ways we couldn’t have imagined, to be heard by complete strangers all brought together in the power of the Spirit?

We consider Pentecost to be the birthday of the church when the small group of disciples – a group of people who had been so afraid of the civil and religious authorities that they abandoned Jesus as he died on the cross -- were transformed and emboldened to witness to what they had experienced of God through God’s Son Jesus and his power on their lives. One the one hand something entirely new; on the other rooted deeply in Jewish tradition, the Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot, a harvest festival mentioned more than once in the Torah and also occasion to renew the promises and obligations of the Noahic covenant.<sup>2</sup>

Somehow these folks from the backwater of Galilee were empowered by the Spirit to make the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ known in the primary language of their hearers gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. And as they witnessed to the power of God they moved beyond their limited selves to become the church – the body of Christ in which we participate today.

We believe it was an event changing the world for all time. And yet, of course, the world continues to change. I think we have a sense that we are going to be allowing God to work through us to create a church that is responsive to the time we live in that might never be the same, even as the disciples were never the same after Pentecost – not a bouncing back to a false security, but a bouncing forward.

The amazing and somewhat puzzling account of what happened to the disciples as they

all were gathered is given only four verses in the Acts of the Apostles among the many thousands in the New Testament. Surely, the language used to describe this event has a rich resonance in biblical history. The loud sound is described as “like the rush of a violent wind” that “filled the entire house” – the sound so extraordinary as to cause the Jews to gather and to be bewildered, amazed, and astonished. The language used is evocative of God’s manifestations in the history of the Jewish people at Sinai<sup>3</sup>, the strong wind of God’s manifestation to Elijah<sup>4</sup> and his ascension.<sup>5</sup> Fire is also a sign of God’s presence.<sup>6</sup> Fire also destroys what is in its path – in Isaiah we have the phrase “as the tongue of fire devours the stubble.”<sup>7</sup> And yet, in the end, we are left with the mystery of explaining the powerful and sure manifestation of God—just as likely, it seems, in a roar and flame as in a breathe and silence

Pentecost...clearly it’s a gift from God to the church and to the world. But are we to understand the meaning of Pentecost as a once and for all time historical event that only benefits but does not somehow affect us? Yes and no. I believe in this account of Pentecost we have a model of how God works in us to transform us to God’s agents of power and transformation of others.

However, when we think of the context of the Pentecost, we have to use our imaginations and realize that our context is quite different from that of the disciples. How would God get our attention today? Clearly the disciples were waiting as Jesus had urged them to do. What image would convey for us how the Holy Spirit might most readily encounter us and enable us to testify?

Perhaps today what we would most need is to create some stillness and space in our lives – even in sometimes relentless roar of our own anxieties and fears -- so that we can be open to and understand God’s call, to develop a compassion for all creation, to witness to God’s love and presence in the world in a way that’s comprehensible to others. Perhaps we have needed this isolation, even loneliness, to learn new truths about ourselves and about others and about our need to build true and compassionate community. Perhaps those on the front lines have reminded us in ways we need to be reminded of what it is to live a courageous life of service. Perhaps we

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3 Exo 19:16-19

4 1Ki 19:11-12

5 2Ki 2:11

6 Gen 15:17, Exo 3:2, 13:21-22; 14:24, 19:18, 24:17, Deu 2:12, 24, 33, 36; 5:4, 10:3, 1Ki 19:12, 2Kgs 2:11, LXX Ps 17:9.

have needed to appreciate more fully how vulnerable our brothers and sisters are because of age or color of skin or because of the conditions of their employment and the density of the neighborhoods in which they live. Perhaps we have needed to be shaken loose from the comforts and certainties of our lives, to experience wrenching loss and utter vulnerability, so that something else can be born in us.

If we are created in God's image, then we should share in God's intense desire to communicate Godself, and to be known in the breaking of bread and in the prayers. I'm reminded of a quote from George Eliot in *Middlemarch*: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence." May we hear what God would have us apprehend in this time which has not existed ever before. May we be open to moving beyond ourselves and open to transformation. May we be open to the grace and power of the Holy Spirit that would have us share the love of Christ with others for the life of all the earth. *Amen.*

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