

Pentecost - Where all voices are heard
Christ Church - 24 May 2015
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Acts 2: 1-21

2 When Pentecost Day arrived [a Jewish festival called Shavu'ot], they were all together in one place [as was the custom for all devout Jews]. 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 above 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. (Other languages here)

5 There were Jews from every nation under heaven visiting in Jerusalem [who were there for the festival]. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. 7 They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? 8 How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), 11 Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!" 12 They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" 13 Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!"

14 Peter 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! 15 These people aren't drunk, after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! 16 Rather, 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.

18 Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

19 I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
... fire and a cloud of smoke.

20 The sun will be changed into darkness,
and the moon will [look red like] blood,
before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes.

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

Good Sabbath to you. May your family be blessed. May your children be prosperous. May your harvest be plentiful. May your joys be many.

Our ancestors loved a good festival and an opportunity to connect with folks they hadn't seen since the last festival. Or to meet new folks. Pentecost is the Greek name for Shavuot, the Jewish Feast of Weeks, a prominent feast in the calendar of ancient Israel celebrating harvest and the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Our ancestors were people of the land. They depended upon God's assistance in producing a bounty and they had festivals to ask God for help, and to thank God. Jesus certainly participated in many parties and gatherings. Just like us....we like our potlucks, too. Thanking God was a very important practice in both religious and family life.

[The Festival of Weeks; Shavuot; and Pentecost are described in some detail in] Leviticus 23:15_22 reads: "And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord. You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an offering, each made of two_tenths of an ephah; they shall be of choice flour, baked with leaven, as first fruits to the Lord. You shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, one young bull, and two rams; they shall be a burnt_offering to the Lord, along with their grain_offering and their drink_offerings, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord. ...[Ritual was crucial] On that same day you shall make proclamation; you shall hold a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations....

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the foreigners: I am the Lord your

God.”

The word “Pentecost” itself is derived from the Greek word for 50, pente. - seven weeks of seven days from Passover until the day after the seventh Sabbath, or the 50th day.

In addition to the very specific formula for calculating the day of Pentecost, the Leviticus passage moves beyond the expression of gratitude and offerings to God to justice..., with the moral and ethical demand to not harvest the fields to their fullest extent, but to leave the edges for the poor. Today, most of us eat quite well and often on the backs of those who work the fields, here and in other countries.. [We can visualize] those who were landless following behind the Harvesters in order to pick up what had been dropped or to glean what had been left. ...The Harvesters were not to beat olive trees or strip grape vines completely, as a reminder that they were once poor and landless themselves, and God had provided for them. The Harvesters, therefore, were to consider their land, their trees, and their vineyards as a means of providing for the poor. Today, if we are to follow these ancient instructions, we could also do much more to provide for others less able than ourselves.

Pentecost was essentially a celebration for those who had been lifted out of poverty and slavery to remember that abundance and freedom brings with it the responsibility to provide for those who continue to live in poverty and oppression. (Mark Davis)

All of this provides some context for the Pentecost gathering... These folks were in the middle of one of many Jewish festivals, offering gratitude to God for abundance and support. As we enter their story as told in Acts, we can imagine the excitement of new beginnings that they may have felt gathered together. The followers of the Way were growing in numbers. They had seen the power of the Spirit as it guided Jesus and worked through him. I imagine every time they gathered more memories were shared -

Remember when that huge crowd gathered on the hillside to listen to

Jesus. And they got hungry and we fed them.... miraculously from only a few pieces of bread and fish? Were you there when Lazarus was brought back to life? I was there and it was amazing.

So as they sat and ate and celebrated and shared memories, certainly the Spirit was palpable in that room. They could literally feel the spirit moving and shaking and making all of them feel intensively alive as a part of this powerful ministry and faith community.

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 above 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.

I was especially drawn in by the diversity of this picture. People from all over that area had gathered for the festival. Imagine the variety in faces and clothing.... the smells of the different foods that were being prepared....The varied beliefs and perspectives. The differences in social status. Those who were comfortable and had resources and those who struggled....all who came to celebrate this holy festival, to thank God for their lives and resources. And suddenly, many different languages were being lifted up....And all voices were heard and understood.... All were heard! All voices shared some of the truth of God's love.... of God's inclusive nature.

Today we are celebrating and remembering the early beginnings of our Christian church. Remembering the powerful message that Jesus preached and still brings to us today.

Scripture also gives a caution. The crowds thought these people who had been filled with the Spirit were drunk. They were not, and, Robert Roth, writer and social activist reminds us that we need to be careful that we're not too sober. Too "serious, too dependent upon routine, too predictable, and logical— we need the spontaneity, creativity, and flexibility required for hearing and understanding what God is doing in our midst." The early Methodist were sometimes thought of as a

pretty serious group. They had a method they followed. John Wesley had rules - simple but significant.... Do Good, Do no Harm, and Stay in love with God. At the same time, Methodists were also known for their exuberant singing and dedication to mission work. Do you remember what the sign is for Methodists? Enthusiasm... sometimes they might have appeared drunk with enthusiasm. Today we strive for a balance between enthusiasm for God and the ministry of inclusive love that Jesus taught us and too much attention given to rules.

Soberly, we want everything to make sense, in an orderly and sequential way. Then when hardships come, with news of riots, crises, and sleepless nights. Or when tough decisions must be made. When life shakes us up, we need to be ready and open to changing direction. We need to be ready to hear what God is calling us to do and be. We need to be open to hearing different languages, other perspectives, and unfamiliar ideas.

Today is also a very special anniversary in Methodism. Do any of you realize the significance of May 24th? On this day in 1738, John Wesley went to a prayer meeting and felt his “heart strangely warmed.” Though he was ordained and had an active life and ministry, he described himself as one with a “Fair summer religion”. He lived by doing good works. But on this day in 1738, he had a close and personal experience of God and truly found his faith and a deeper relationship with God. possibly much like what the ancients may have felt that day when the Spirit moved through them. Even though they spoke different languages, ALL were heard and understood. John Wesley’s life was radically changed that day, much like those who felt the spirit moving within and around them, shaking up their world.

Today, we celebrate the lively Spirit of God, God’s gentle and occasionally wild presence, that transforms our lives, breaks down barriers, and gives us new life.

On the day of Pentecost, a wild spirit encompassed the early Christian movement, shaking everything up...Fire and wind, turning everything upside down, uniting the separated, and inviting everyone to be part of God’s community. During that Pentecost, diversity became a blessing –

with no in or out, or superior or inferior, but a democracy of the spirit embracing the least and the most. ... (Bruce Epperly)

Because of the experiences that these early church folks had, the ancient Jewish festival became a feast day commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ and today it is sometimes called the "Birthday of the Church".

We are blessed with a rich harvest. We have much to be grateful for. And like John Wesley... we know something is missing.... we need more. We need a deeper connection with Spirit....with God and with each other. Pentecost is a holy day that challenges us... to go deeper. To follow the lead of Spirit within us.

The larger Christian church, our United Methodist denomination.... and here at Christ Church, we need Pentecost. We are in need of a rebirth. We need the sweet, sweet Spirit to enter us, join with us, fill us....May the Spirit of God light a flame within us. Amen