

Day of Pentecost_YrB_052415_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of *God the Creator, the Redeemer and the Spirit of Life. Amen.*

Hail thee, festival day!! In case you haven't noticed, today is the Day of Pentecost - the conclusion of the *Great Fifty Days of Easter*. But we're not going out with a "ho, hum: bring on the next season." This is a feast day that takes us out with a bang!

There are three major feast days in the church: *Christmas - the birth of Jesus; Easter: the resurrection of Jesus; and Pentecost: the coming of the Holy Spirit*. All three of them have, on the one hand, a physical element to them - a birth, a death, and...well, something weird and mysterious and inexplicable. But on the other hand, they are also seasons - not just one-time events that are forgotten 24 hours later.

In the circle of the church year, these seasons are the days and weeks and months that we need to enter into the mystery of those events - to be able to wonder about what *God* has done and is doing in our lives and in the world, and to remind ourselves about who and why we really are. So let's begin to explore the mystery of Pentecost.

It is fitting, I think, that when we began the *Great Fifty Days* 7 weeks ago at the Easter Vigil, one of the Vigil lessons was the same one that Brenda read this morning - the story of the Valley of the Dry Bones. The focal point of the story during the Vigil was, as a part of the salvation history of the people of *God*, the prophecy of Ezekiel that *God* would restore to life the people of Israel. Today the story bookends that prophecy with its emphasis on the role of the Spirit as the breath of life for the whole world.

In our Godly Play class, Frances told the story this morning of the *Mystery of Pentecost*. The mystery began with the story of a city from long, long ago. (I'm going to bet that many of us learned this story a long time ago.) The story of the city of Babel was told by our ancient Hebrew ancestors to explain the variety of peoples and languages and nations of the world. They asked themselves, if humans had all come from the same place, how could there be so many different languages, so many different colors and sizes and shapes of peoples spread out all over the

world? Why couldn't everyone understand everyone else? Why did it sound like so much babbling?

So, they told this story to answer their questions: Way back when, everyone trusted God and knew who they were in relation to God. AND, way back when - when there was still just one language, if you said the word, "bird," everyone knew it meant bird, and the word "rock" meant rock and the word "sun" meant sun. But the people grew tired of trusting in God; they were tired of looking to God to be the source of their security and identity. They wanted to make a name for themselves. So they decided to build a city, and in the middle of that city they would build a tower reaching up to the heavens that would bring themselves some fame - that would make themselves like God.

Well, God heard about this plan and said, "This is not good." And here's the amazing part: God said, "Now nothing they propose to do will be impossible for them." In other words, if people can communicate with one another well enough to build a tower into the heavens and make themselves like God, they'll be able to do anything they put their minds to. That's how powerful the ability to communicate is.

So, to save humans from themselves, God scrambled up their language. Bird was no longer "bird." Now it's also *oiseau* and *ave* and *uccello*. "Rock" is also *roche* and *stein* and *pietra*. And "sun" is also *shemesh* and *soleil* and *helios*. The people could no longer communicate; they became strangers to one another. They scattered, and the city was called Babel, because that's what it sounded like.

Now, fast-forward many, many years to the city of Jerusalem. It's 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus had told his followers to wait together in the city because he would send the Holy Spirit to be with them, to comfort them and strengthen them and guide them into all truth.

But Jesus' followers weren't the only ones in the city. Jewish pilgrims from all over the world had come to Jerusalem, because what became our Pentecost began on a Jewish holiday, 50 days after Passover, a yearly festival when the first fruits of the wheat harvest were presented, and God's covenant with Israel was celebrated and renewed. This was one of the three great festivals of the Jewish year.

So lots of people from far and wide had come to Jerusalem, and the city was babbling with the sounds of a multitude of languages.

Suddenly, the Holy Spirit came to the followers of Jesus. First, there was the rush of a violent wind that blew their socks off. Then tongues of fire rested on their heads and set their minds and hearts on fire. Then they started speaking in all kinds of different languages: Arabic, Persian, Latin, maybe a little Greek or Spanish or Swahili, too. And everyone who heard them could understand what was being said in their own language.

On that day in Jerusalem - on Pentecost - through the breath of the Holy Spirit and the gift of being able to communicate, the obstacle of Babel was undone. And this is key: God undid Babel, but not by bringing the whole world back to the way things always were. On that day, the diversity of languages was no longer a curse, but a wonder. Pentecost affirms the diversity of the world, the richness of the multitude of peoples and languages, and the gift that resulted in the idea that when people can hear and understand, when people can communicate, whether across the barriers of languages, or the barrier of simply being one stranger speaking with another, things change.

The Book of Common Prayer says that we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we stop being strangers with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation. Today, throughout the church, people from far and wide will be welcomed as new members of the family of God through the sacrament of baptism, just as the church has welcomed new folks during the whole of the Great Fifty Days.

In this family of God to which we belong, we celebrate the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We see diversity and recognize it as a good thing. We believe we can - we must, communicate - speaking and listening and making friends out of strangers. As the baptized, we make promises to seek and serve Christ in all persons, not just people who look like us or talk like us or believe like us. We promise to respect the dignity of all people. We promise to love our neighbors - even people strange to us - as ourselves.

This kind of love - this kind of welcome of others, speaking and listening to others - will look very strange to people who are not in the family. It did on that first Pentecost. Onlookers, when they saw and heard all this harmony among strangers and communication across barriers and love flying around like tongues of fire caught by the wind, said, "What's going on here? They must be drunk!"

When we're living with the reckless joy that the Spirit of *God* makes possible, when we are emboldened to work for justice and peace among all people, when we delight in diversity, and see no one as a stranger, but rather as someone who bears the very image of *God* -- others may indeed wonder what's gotten into us. They may ridicule us. They may think we're a little strange.

Or perhaps they'll want to join us, being brought into love and harmony with *God*, ourselves, our neighbors, and all creation, and we'll be strangers no more.