

Day of Pentecost_YrB_052712

All Saints Episcopal Church

You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; *
and so you renew the face of the earth.

In the name of God the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer. Amen.

Good morning! Today is the Day of Pentecost - the conclusion of the Great Fifty Days of Easter. But we're not going out with a whimper, just sliding into the next season. This is a feast day that takes us out with a bang!

There are three major (that would be Major with a capital M) feasts 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 more or less physical element to them - a birth, a death, and a gathering of people where something happened to all of them to enable them to understand each other's language. (I know that last one is a little weak, but bear with me.)

On the other hand, all of these feasts are not just single days - one-time miraculous events that are over in 24 hours or even less. They are also, in the circle of the church year, seasons - days and weeks and months that we need to enter into the mystery of the events - to be able to wonder about what God has done and is doing and to remind ourselves about who and why we really are. So lets begin to explore the mystery of Pentecost.

In our Godly Play class, we listened to the story of the Mystery of Pentecost a couple of weeks ago, since Sunday School was going to be finished before today. The mystery began with the story of a city from long, long ago. The story 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 how, if humans had all come from the same origin, there could be so many different languages, so many different colors of peoples spread out all over the world? Why couldn't everyone understand everyone else? Why did it sound like so much babbling?

So, this is the story they told to answer their questions: Way back when everyone still had one language, if you said, "bird," everyone knew bird, and rock was "rock"

and sun was "sun." But the people were 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.

God heard about this plan and said, "This is not good." And here's the amazing part: God said, "Nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them." In other words, if people can communicate with one another well enough to build a tower into the heavens, 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 *vogel*. And sun is also *shemesh* and *soleil* and *helios*. The people could no longer communicate; they become strangers to one another. They scattered, and the city was called Babel, because that's what it sounded like.

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

But Jesus' followers aren't the only ones in the city. Jewish pilgrims from all over the world have 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 have come to Jerusalem, and the city is 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 hats 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 power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of being able to communicate, the obstacle of Babel was undone. On that day, the diversity of languages was not a curse, but a wonder. And this is

important: God undid Babel, but not by bringing the whole world back into speaking one language. Pentecost affirms the diversity of the world, the richness of the multitude of peoples and languages, and the gift that when you 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 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, ultimately, 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.

(Thanks to Amy Richter and Lane Denson)