

Sermon for May 31, 2020 – “Blazing Apostles”

Pentecost Sunday, Year A – Texts: Numbers 11:16-17, 23-30; Acts 2:1-21

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After seven weeks of celebrating the season of Resurrection, seven weeks since we gathered with the women at the empty tomb on Easter morning and having celebrated the Ascension we’ve come to the next big moment of the church year. Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost is the day we celebrate, among other things, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Today, the Spirit comes unexpectedly and surprisingly into the gathering of disciples and sets them on fire, somewhat literally and in dramatic fashion. Tongues of fire, impromptu sermons, intrigued crowds, and a few thousand baptisms. The Pentecost story is one that we’d love to see and experience more often in our congregations and worship services.

Yet, we modern Christians have an odd relationship with Pentecost. My guess would be that this year is no exception. This especially true given the events of the last few months as we’ve been hunkered down in our homes waiting. And waiting. And waiting. But waiting for...what? Waiting for life to return to normal? Waiting for our church to re-open? (Which—as mentioned—should happen June 14!)

Pentecost comes from Greek meaning the fiftieth. The fiftieth day from Passover, seven weeks after Easter. Pentecost is one of the major church festivals along with Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, and All Saints. It’s often called the Church’s birthday, but it lacks the fanfare of Christmas or Easter, instead, it’s usually a day we confirm young people or recognize graduates. It’s usually a Sunday that moves us from Easter in spring to green summer Sundays.

Still, I don’t know about you, but for me there’s something about the Pentecost story, something that resonates deeply. There’s something about the excitement and drama of the very beginning of the Church that makes us want to look back on those thrilling days of yesteryear to wax nostalgic, even for just a short time. Even if they turn to feelings of loss and grief realizing that the “golden age” we once knew is gone—perhaps for good. It began with a small group of disciples, now apostles, that are abruptly thrust out into the public square out of hiding and into plain sight. Tongues of fire appear, a sudden, violent wind blows, and the entire city of Jerusalem is, on some level, forever changed. The crowds just come. They come in droves, and get this, they come without ever being asked. Yep, no outreach campaigns. No one went door to door distributing pamphlets inviting people to church. Three thousand people are baptized. It’s chaotic. It’s exciting. Throngs of people came to church.

What must that have been like? Ah, those were the days, huh? Look at us now. No, I mean it, seriously look at us now. We hope to re-open in two weeks—June 14.

And we will do so in the throes of a pandemic. Hopefully, the tail end of it—but you never know. Nevertheless, we'll have restrictions in place. Among other things, we'll be unable to share the sacraments, we'll be unable to shake hands or offer hugs, we'll be back—though it won't be the same. But let's be honest, we weren't exactly packing them in most Sundays no matter what we did to recapture the moment even before the pandemic hit. It isn't easy and normal for people to just show up to church anymore. And there's a lot of work involved in keeping the folks we have. Heck, there's often lots of work just to get ourselves here. Church today is nowhere near as effortless as it seemed to be on Pentecost. Trust me, it isn't. It certainly isn't as easy, or as effortless as many of us remember. We can look around most Sundays and remember the faces that once sat in empty spots. We can remember the days when many hands made for light work. We recall when it was easy to have a potluck or congregational event. We can remember the hordes of kids running around, Sunday school rooms filled to capacity. The days when the back windows of the sanctuary were open, and chairs set up to accommodate the overflow. Now, we do it so we can accommodate the social distancing mandate. What in the wide, wide world of sports is a-goin' on?

What happened? What happened to our Pentecost energy? What happened to the presence of the Holy Spirit? Is it gone? Is it gone for good? I would hope not. I'd imagine we miss it so maybe a better question is, do we long for it? Do we long for that energy? For that Pentecost fire to come and wake our church again? If only we could find that again. If only the Spirit would come with a sound like the rush of a violent wind and fill our church as it filled the tent of meeting where Moses and the elders of Israel were gathered, as it filled the house where the apostles were sitting. If only divided tongues as of fire appeared among us, rested on each of us as it rested on each of them. If only the Holy Spirit would fill us as it filled them, as it filled the elders of Israel. Because we can see still that the world can get caught up in Pentecost-like moments. We can catch glimpses of what seems like Pentecost energy/drama in the news, on social media, in our communities often seemingly out of the reach of churches. Yet, at the same time we also see how fleeting it all is, how interest and drama comes and goes in the blink of an eye, how quickly it can be shut down in the wake of a pandemic.

And so we wonder how to find it again if we'll ever experience it again in our lives or in our church. Will church ever have that effortless energy again? Sometimes I wonder.

I'll be honest I thought we'd built up a bit of momentum as my DMin project was completed. Now, I'd never consider, even for a moment, that any of this was about me. Seriously. But as a pastor a good bit of the time you're like a surfer waiting to catch a wave. You're looking for something, anything that is going to provide that spark, ways to energize people. So, based on the feedback of the participants I thought that we might be able to use some of the positive energy surrounding the project as a springboard to something new. That was kind of the whole point of the project.

Silly me, what was I thinking?

Of course, as usual, there's more to the story and guess what as usual it's bigger than us. It's easy to think of the crowds and excitement. But when you think about it Pentecost was scary and confusing. It was dangerous and momentary. It's easy to forget just how terrifying those days leading up to Pentecost were for the followers of Jesus. The women had come back from the empty tomb on Easter. Jesus had appeared in the locked room twice. He appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He appeared to them serving them breakfast on the shores of Lake Galilee. He appeared to them in the moments before He ascended into heaven leaving them bewildered looking upward towards the sky. Now, the disciples were hiding, hunkered down fearful and confused about what would happen to them, what would come next for them. Nothing seemed to be in their control. Sound familiar?

But then all of a sudden they were thrust into the streets, out from hiding into public view from the closed circle of Jesus' friends to being revealed to Jews and Gentiles alike. And even though it was chaotic they somehow managed to grab hold of some control. Somehow they managed to get organized enough to baptize three thousand people! Now, adding three thousand members is a good day for a church by any standard, but it's easy for us to forget how fleeting it was. Think about it. Those three thousand new members each went home. They didn't stick around Jerusalem. They didn't band together, build a church, hire a pastor, and start forming committees. None of the churches to whom Paul wrote his letters were mega-churches. The church in Corinth had maybe a hundred and fifty people. The church in Rome was, for the most part, configured in smaller groups for fear of Roman persecution. Paul wrote to small groups of disciples all wondering how to become the church of Jesus Christ, how to truly become His followers. He wrote about how to live and work together while waiting for his return to save them from their struggles. Again, sound familiar?

It probably should because the truth of the matter is that despite our numbers in the past the Church over the course of the past two thousand or so years more often than not has looked like those first disciples, hiding away not sure of what to do next in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. The church has been, for the most part, those smaller communities of the faithful navigating the day to day ministry and life amongst the strange and chaotic world around them. Not a heck of a whole lot has changed. The drama and excitement, the crowds of Pentecost did not become the norm. It was only momentary.

Even in a time of mega-churches Pentecost is **not** the model for being church in the world. The model has always been **Easter**. The Spirit's coming was for an Easter community. The tongues of fire, the crowds, 1 and baptisms, were all for the sake of the gospel, all to help the disciples re-tell the Easter story. To tell the world around them the good news of resurrection, of new life abundant and eternal.

And yeah, though we try to convince ourselves otherwise Easter is confusing. It's about empty tombs and unbelievable stories, scars that remain for no apparent reason. It's about Jesus showing up where we least expect Him and messing with us in ways we often cannot fully comprehend. Easter's about recognizing that we have no control over what God is up to in the world, that Jesus is ushering in new life, that God's Spirit cannot be contained, that we're just along for the ride. And let's face it, that sometimes scares us.

The disciples, the faithful, the Church; we are all Easter people given a Pentecost moment. We're not a Pentecost people given an Easter moment. Easter defines us. Easter claims us. Because you see death and resurrection bring new life. And the story we tell every week whenever and wherever time we gather when we confess our faith when God's Word is read and proclaimed when we gather at the baptismal font and communion table is in one form or another the Easter Story. Fine, but what about Pentecost? Well, Pentecost is about empowering us to **tell** the story to **live it out**. It's the Spirit's way of pointing us back to Easter. It's the Spirit's way of reminding us that new life comes in surprising and unexpected ways.

Pentecost is God's way of breathing life into the Church and giving us a glimpse of the new life the Gospel brings. That is—if we're willing. If we're willing to tell the story to those needing to hear it. If we're willing to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. If we're willing to bear one another's burdens together so that no **one** person will have to bear them alone. And so, while we are Pentecost people, we remain—first and foremost—Easter people. Even when life and ministry aren't full of the wonderful things we remember. Even if the crowds and energy are fleeting. Even if we feel more like those smaller churches to whom Paul was writing instead of the three thousand to whom Peter was preaching. Even when it isn't Pentecost, it's **still** Easter.

Christ is **STILL** risen.

Because with Easter there's always forgiveness of sins, healing and hope for the suffering, life for the dying, resurrection for the dead. The ties that bind us remain intact connecting us to the mystery of faith that Christ has died, Christ has Risen, Christ will come again.

As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "**The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.**" Over the course of the last few weeks we've heard Jesus tell His disciples that He would send them what the Father had promised that they would be "**clothed with power from on high.**" He promised that "**the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth...**" would testify and teach them everything, reminding them of all that Jesus had said and done. He promised He would not leave them—or us—orphanded. And he has not. The promise has been kept.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing, as we re-open our church, as we prepare to gather once more for worship a week hence, my prayer is that Pentecost would serve as a reminder that things rarely stay the same in the church. A reminder that the Spirit blows where and how it will and the only certain thing is change. A reminder not only of who God has made us to be which is Easter people raised to new life in Christ, but who God is. A God who is first and foremost a Creator God who makes all things new.

We've heard the question posed in our first reading, **"Is the Lord's power limited?"** No, it isn't. Of course it isn't. As I've repeatedly said: Christ is STILL risen. So, as we embrace the gifts of the Holy Spirit and allow it to empower our lives, as the breath of God fills us with life anew, as it fills our church's sails now we shall see. Now we shall see whether God's word will come true for us or not. We know darn well that it will! In the meantime, we've work to do—let's get to it!

Come Holy Spirit.

Amen and amen.