

SUMMER

SERMON SERIES - 2021

May 23, 2021

Pentecost

Bishop Greg Mohr, British Columbia Synod

Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

The Acts of the Apostles...no...of the Spirit!

Today is a major celebration in the church year. It is Pentecost Sunday – that day when we celebrate how God lives and moves and has being among us.

Now, first of all, I must say this: whoever put this Bible together and named each of the books has it wrong! The title of this book of Acts is very misleading. The book we call “The Acts of the Apostles” has the wrong title. It should be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit!”

That’s what this book is about. That is who this book is about.

Oh, sure, the apostles do plenty of action in this book, but most of their action is reaction. The real action in the story, the real direction in the story, is from the Holy Spirit.

Open up “the Acts of the Apostles” and check it out. All throughout the seven weeks of the Easter season, whether in years A, B or C, we read from the book of Acts. What we see when we read these texts is that every major move that the church or the leaders of the church make in the book of Acts is initiated and prodded by the Holy Spirit.

Here in today’s reading, we find the disciples gathered in an upper room, waiting, waiting . . . for what, they do not know, but they are practically as good as dead.

The great, glorious, heady days following Jesus' resurrection now seem so distant. Jesus had left them once again and they are all alone.

Oh, sure, Jesus promised that he would send them something; something the Scriptures call the Counsellor or the Advocate, but really, what did that mean?

And so they stayed there in Jerusalem, all huddled up together.

How could that small group of lifeless and dispirited disciples do anything? How could they achieve anything? Their motley crew had little hope – and even less confidence.

But like that Valley of the Dry bones that we read about in the book of Ezekiel, we witness how the wind/breath/spirit of God began to blow. In and through them, God's spirit moved.

They say it looked like flames, and that image evokes all the other Biblical images of how the presence of God is described in the language of flame and fire.

We think of the time Moses encountered God in the burning bush.

We're reminded of the story of the Exodus, where God led the people in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Perhaps we recall the story of the Transfiguration, where Jesus' appearance is changed and his face shone.

The image of flames is NOT the most important thing here, however. It might be cool from a cinematic point of view, but what makes this account even more dramatic, even more unbelievable, is that here the Holy Spirit is given to them all.

Previously, the Spirit was a special possession for a special purpose. We think of the Judges or the prophets throughout Scripture: God calls, the spirit is given, an individual accomplishes the task.

But here at Pentecost, God changes the way God operates. A new thing is being done among us. God's spirit shall be with and abide with us all the time.

My goodness – do you understand what is being said and done? God's spirit resting on each of us, to bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world;

God's spirit resting on each of us, to be God's agents in this world, to be a vehicle of love and compassion, to be a prophetic voice in the midst of our communities; no longer the purview of one person here and there; no longer the task given simply to one here and one there – but to us all.

My goodness – what is this Spirit up to? Is there no end to the breadth and depth of the spirit's workings?

It starts here in this story in the book of Acts and continues on.

Time and time again, we read of how the spirit propels the church onward into new ventures, into new ways of experiencing the love of Christ, into new and sometimes difficult understandings of what it means to be the people of God.

All throughout this book of Acts, we see the spirit at work.

Gathered in Jerusalem that day were Jewish people from “every nation on earth” for a big celebration. That long listing of the nations in our reading from Acts is meant to convey that every nation on earth had somebody there at Pentecost.

There were strange nations with strange-sounding, difficult to pronounce names like Cappadocians, Medes, Elamites and Mesopotamians.

But as one scholar has pointed out, this Pentecost gathering is not only a diverse ethnic gathering, it is also a historically impossible one as well.

Those Medes who were there that Pentecost would have had a tough time getting to Jerusalem from Mesopotamia, not only because they had to travel a few hundred kilometers but because they had to travel a couple of hundred years as well. The Medes had been long gone from the face of the earth for at least two centuries.

And those Elamites? They were mentioned back in the book of Ezra but not again. Those Elamites were also lost in the past.

We have here not only a gathering of people from the north and south, east and west, but also from the living and the dead. Fascinating!

As I travel throughout the churches of our ELCIC and of other denominations, I notice a particular architectural feature in some of our very oldest congregations.

Perhaps you also are familiar with this: The front of the church is very typical of a lot of older churches, where there is a communion rail in the shape of a half-circle that wraps around the altar.

An architect friend once told me that the shape and design was very intentional theologically and symbolically. The design arose from the time when most churches had a cemetery as part of the church property.

As you gathered for communion you came and knelt around the altar, in this half-circle arrangement. The symbolism was that the rest of the circle extended out into the rest of the church property, where the church cemetery was.

In other words, when you came to the altar for Holy Communion, you were being reminded that you gathered not just with the people who were sitting in the pew next to you, but you also gathered with all the saints, with the communion of saints, of every time and every place.

You gathered not only with Grandma and Grandpa and Great Uncle Frederick and Aunt Martha, but you also gathered with those mentioned here in Acts, chapter 2: Elamites, Cappadocians and Mesopotamians.

This strange, playful story is Acts way of saying that when God's spirit was poured out at Pentecost it was poured out not just for a few, but for all. The Holy Spirit is God's way of being portable; of not being restricted to time and place.

It is often said that the word "God" is not a noun but a verb. It is a word of action. The same is true of that aspect of God — the Holy Spirit — it is a verb, an action, alive, engaged.

This is an active God: seeking, searching, leading, guiding, comforting, renewing, saving, loving, calling.

The Spirit is given to call us forward, to call us into action, to be agents of change and seekers of justice, engaged in neighbour-love, grounded in service.

One of the terms used in Scripture for the Holy Spirit is that of Counsellor. This name of Counsellor isn't so much about making us feel better, as it is a Counsellor who helps you work through things, and make changes in your life, your attitudes and your actions.

Another translation of the biblical term for Holy Spirit is that of Advocate. We think of someone who walks beside us and advocates on our behalf. But this is done not so you can be a passive participant. Rather — an advocate helps you to achieve change, transformation and justice.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Abide in us. Restore us. Transform us. Re-orient us. Propel us forward into love, service, justice-seeking and justice-making, love for the world of God's holy creation, love for each other, love for the neighbour.

Maybe that half-circle of a communion railing isn't just about being reminded of the saints who have gone before us. Maybe that half-circle extends out beyond the cemetery, into the world beyond, into God's beloved creation, among all people, neighbours and strangers, beloved.

Amen.