

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
Day of Pentecost – Sunday, May 31, 2020
John 20:19-23

Holy Spirit of God, may the refining fire of Your love reach into our hidden, inmost places and make us one Spirit with You. Amen.

Today we celebrate the Day of Pentecost. The Great Fifty Days of Easter have come to a dramatic conclusion with God bestowing the Holy Spirit upon the gathering of Jesus' disciples. New life is breathed into creation and God's divine presence is experienced in wind and fire. On this day, the community of Jesus' disciples are inspired and empowered to continue his ministry and to bring to all the good news of the in-breaking kingdom of God.

The celebration of Pentecost has deep roots in Judaism, even while the particular meaning of the day has changed over time. In the Hebrew liturgical calendar, Pentecost was originally an agricultural celebration, also known as the Festival of Weeks, rejoicing in the completion of the spring harvest and giving thanks for the bounty. But by the first century, the celebration of Pentecost had become a commemoration of the giving of the Law to Moses and the gathered nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the gathered followers of Jesus fifty days after Easter, fulfilling the promise made by the risen Christ that they would "receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8). This act of divine presence marks the initiation and empowerment of the early Church.

This morning, we are presented two accounts of the giving of the Holy Spirit – one from the Book of Acts and one from the Gospel of John. Although they differ, they both speak its transformative power and signify the empowering of the Church to carry out the ministry of Jesus and be his hands and feet in the world. According to the account in Acts, while the disciples were gathered together, the Spirit came upon the community with the sound of a "rushing wind" and with "tongues of fire" resting on each one of them. Remarkably, as the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in many languages of God's deeds of power.

Wind and fire are both important symbols of the divine presence. In the Hebrew bible, the same word means both "wind" and "spirit," as in the creation story where the divine wind moves over the primordial waters, initiating the acts of creation. Fire, too, is significantly associated with God and the divine presence, most notably in the story of Moses and the bush that burned without being consumed, as well as in the Exodus account of the pillar of fire that led the Israelites by night out through the desert.

This Pentecost scene in Acts powerfully illustrates the empowerment of the gathered faithful to go into the world and share the good news of God's work in Christ. As it was in the beginning of creation and in the history of Israel, the Spirit of God was again at work creating this new community of followers of Christ – the Church.

In the account from the Gospel of John, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon the disciples on the day of Resurrection. Early on that Easter morning, Mary Magdalene had reported to the others that she had seen the Lord. In the evening when the disciples were fearfully gathered behind locked doors, the resurrected Lord appears before them. Jesus greets them saying "Peace be with you" and he shows them his hands and his side, which bear the wounds of his crucifixion. The disciples rejoice as they see for themselves that Jesus has overcome death and the grave. Jesus then says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The mission that had been given to Jesus by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit is now entrusted to the gathered disciples. Jesus then breathes on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

John's Pentecost account illustrates the transformative power of the Holy Spirit: the frightened disciples cowering behind a bolted door then emerge from hiding as fearless and fervent followers of the risen Lord. The disciples demonstrate how the indwelling divine presence endows, empowers, and

inspires even these cowards – and this brings great hope and promise to this coward. The experience of the risen Lord and the gift of the Holy Spirit emboldened them to be fearless in continuing Jesus’ ministry, and this same Spirit emboldens and empowers us today.

The Pentecost account in Acts shows us what living God-centered and Spirit-infused lives can look like: lives inspired and enlivened with the divine presence; lives transformed and mission-focused; lives in which the separation and fragmentation of humanity is overcome. The Holy Spirit, coming as roaring wind and tongues of fire, transforms the gathering of disciples into the community of apostles, and ignites within them the power to carry out Jesus’ mission of truth and reconciliation and to speak to all peoples of God’s deeds of power.

Sometimes this truth is an unwanted message - it threatens our comfort and stability. Sometimes it compels us to look into long-forgotten corners of our heart and claim the unloved and disused parts we hoped would disappear if only we look elsewhere. We want the Holy Spirit to console and comfort like a dove, but Pentecost Sunday reminds us that the power of the Holy Spirit will not be tamed by our wishes. God’s power of love and reconciliation can also be a fearsome experience - creation and destruction are two sides of the same coin.

It is important to note, that the Pentecost experience was not a private mystical encounter, but a public outpouring of Divine presence that touched them all. Pentecost was then, and is still now, a *communal experience*. Our accounts in Acts and John both agree that the Spirit was given not to each of them; rather it was given to all of them. It is the community that is empowered to continue the mission of Jesus and be his presence in the world. This is why the Church matters, for the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples not for the sake of a private devotional experience, but for the sake of the world. And this same Spirit continues to generate life and enable ministry in the Church today.

So, today, let us celebrate the birth of the Church – the faithful community entrusted with this ministry. Put on your best and brightest colors; play music that makes you want to dance; rejoice in the glorious sunshine. This is the day the Lord hath made. This morning, the beloved community is gathered expectantly, eagerly awaiting the guest of honor who will arrive soon and enliven us all – who may here, even now!

While we are here and while we wait to feel the push of the wind and the heat of the flame, let us remember that together as the community of the faithful, we are empowered to do amazing things. As the church, we have been endowed with the power given to Jesus from the Father and are called to continue his mission in world. And may we dream Pentecost dreams – spirit-inspired dreams of what God is calling Good Shepherd, this particular corner of Christ’s church, to go out and do. How are we to be Christ’s presence in the world and bring peace and healing to a frightened and wounded creation?

Author, poet, and Methodist preacher John Birch wrote a Pentecost poem that I would like to leave with you now.

The Spirit came
and your Church was born,
in wind and fire
and words of power.

The Spirit came
blowing fear aside,
and in its place
weak hearts were stronger.

The Spirit came
as your word foretold,
with dreams and signs,
visions and wonders.

The Spirit came
and is here today,
to feed the hearts
of a world that hungers.