

Pentecost in the Present Tense

I read from three different texts this morning—all of which relate in some way to this celebration we call Pentecost. We often don't recognize that the celebration of Pentecost did not begin with what we read in Acts and the Gospels. As Christians we celebrate this as the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church following Christ's resurrection. Within the biblical narrative it has been fifty days since the disciples began their transformation from fear and grief to wonder and joy at the good news that Jesus has risen. Jesus continued to appear to them for forty days, but he ascended and left them again, telling them to go back to Jerusalem and await the coming of the Advocate which had been promised. When the passage from Acts which I read today begins, it opens with the statement that the disciples were all gathered in one place on the Day of Pentecost. Here Luke is not referring to the event about to happen but to the festival taking place in Jerusalem on that day; a festival which has drawn a large group of people from many lands. Luke is careful to tell us just how varied and diverse the crowd gathered in Jerusalem was as he lists various ethnic groups and countries. It seems that all the peoples of the world were represented as the text says: there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven. They have come to participate in a festival whose roots go deep into Jewish tradition. This gathering of the faithful originated with instructions given to those who followed Moses into the wilderness. This festival's description first appears in Leviticus 23:16-17. It called for the presentation of a first fruits offering to the Lord. For that reason it is also known as the Festival of Weeks and it was designated to come 50 days after the celebration of the Passover. The transliteration of the Hebrew for weeks is Shavuot, another name given to this festival. The timing of the festival of weeks is also associated with Moses receiving the tablets of stone at Sinai in Exodus 34:22. When exiled Israelites came back from Babylon this festival was celebrated as the time when Moses received the Law from the Lord, again 50 days after the Passover was first celebrated. The title Pentecost refers to fifty days having elapsed between Passover which they are to remember as God freeing them from slavery and another major intervention of the Lord in human history. In our passage from Romans, 8:23 Paul refers to our receiving of the Spirit in our lives as first fruits, the sign of our adoption into the body of Christ. Like in the traditions of the people of Israel, this celebration marks a turning point in the Christian story, the story of God's faithful actions toward those claimed. It is very tempting to just celebrate that—to commemorate it as a way to remember God's faithful action in the past. That is not actually a bad thing—if we don't leave it in the past. Celebrating God's faithfulness to his claimed people is a good thing—and we have many opportunities to do that. But we also need to be prompted to seek out God's action among us in the present and prepare for God's action through us in the future. Pentecost doesn't need to be about the past. In fact, as is the case with most historians, Luke is recording the past as a way to make sense of the present and prepare for the future. If we then look at what happens at Pentecost from this point of view—what do we make of the events described? How do we understand that the biblical story which we call the Living Word speak to us? What is it in this story that we can cause us to see God's ongoing activity, the promise that God is with us now, and discern how God is using us just as God used Peter when he began to preach that day. Of course the dramatic presentation of the coming of the Spirit as a sound like the rush of a violent

wind is one that has rooted itself in our imaginations, along with the divided tongues of fire which appeared among them and in fact, came to rest upon them. Perhaps that image is why we like to leave this event in the past. While that image is definitely impressive, it really doesn't sound all that comfortable. And this out breaking of the Holy Spirit was not confined to that day—the entire Book of Acts is a record of the Holy Spirit moving—moving the disciples, changing them, taking them places that they did not plan or maybe even want to go. On this particular day described as when the Spirit promised them arrived, it transformed the man who had denied Jesus three times into the one proclaiming his Lordship to all those gathered people of many nationalities. Another thing which happened was the reversal of what happened in the Genesis passage which I also read this morning. According to Genesis 11:1 the whole earth had one language and the same words until the people gathered settled in one place and began to build that famous tower to the sky. They wanted to make a name for themselves and avoid being scattered over the earth despite being told by God to fill the earth. So on this Day of the Jewish Pentecost, all those gathered were speaking their own language but suddenly upon the sound of that violent wind, what they heard the disciples speaking was in their own language. Instead of confusion, there was understanding. Of course understanding what was said did not universally result in understanding the meaning. I imagine that within the larger group the gathered folk were standing with their own countrymen. That's usually what happens when we gather—we seek out those like us. So standing there and suddenly being able to hear these Galileans speak about God's power and know that was what was being said—was as the text tells us both amazing and perplexing. Some were more open and asked what it could mean. Others sneered and said the disciples were drunk. Peter's response was to address them using the words of the prophet Joel. Our passage ends with the Joel proclamation which tells that in the last days that God's Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh. Peter goes on later to quote King David as well. His speech so moves the people that they ask what is required of them. Peter's answer is repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus who is the promised Messiah. It is not unusual for those voices we hear from the New Testament to carry echoes from the writings and teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures. Peter's understanding that he was living in the last days before the Day of the Lord; the day when final judgment would be pronounced has proven not to be the case. We are still waiting for that day. But what we aren't waiting for is the appearance of the Holy Spirit. Those images of wind and fire and a babble of languages and disciples who seem drunk in the middle of the morning—they are hard to translated into easy explanations. But whatever is being described, what happened on that First Christian Pentecost is one of those events which is outside empirical logic. A commentary I read called it the Present Tense of God. Whatever it was that appeared among the disciples, it suddenly transformed those do-nothing followers into those who were able to get out there and do something. All of them leave that experience altered from being inwardly focused and fearful stay in one room people into those empowered and energized to go and do. The lesson of the story then is obvious. The energy which enables us to do what we are called to do, to do what we need to do, does not come from inside of us. That is to say, it's not just about our will power, it's not just our smarts, it's not simply our cleverness, it's not only our strategies, it's not even our great ideas. The energy we long for, the empowerment we need, is not "in us". This is where we need to understand the Holy Spirit as the present tense of God. The Holy Spirit is

the power of God present to us in our time and place. We tend to view our world as one of success, competition and achievement which celebrates the limitless power of personal will and work, the myth about the vast internal power of individual intelligence and resolve. This is a partially true image—will and effort matter in what we do. But we are ultimately limited by our human finitude. Faith is about believing in God. Faith is about believing certain things to be true, but even more than believing certain things to be true, faith is simply trust, trust in that reality that can be known but not seen; that reality that exist beyond what I can understand. The word for Spirit in the Bible, in both Hebrew and Greek, is literally wind. So when we think of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in the present tense—perhaps a good image is that of the wind beneath our sails—the wind that empowers us—enables us to be the person God intends. In our passage from John’s gospel we have Jesus’ promise that the Advocate will come and be with his followers forever. We celebrate Pentecost not only because the Holy Spirit came to those disciples, but that the promise is that the Holy Spirit is with us—in the present tense. Thanks be to God.