

Pentecost Paradoxes

First, there is the obvious paradox about Pentecost found in the two scriptures which were read today. The coming of the spirit as narrated by John happens immediately, on the evening of Jesus' first appearance to the disciples in that upper room, just as he has shown them his hands and side, the proof of his sufferings. Twice he gives them his shalom, his peace, and then he gives them their mission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Following this Jesus breathes on them and simply says: "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is actually not often spoken of in terms of the Pentecost event because the origin of the word Pentecost is tied to the passage of those fifty days and the two traditional Jewish holy festivals requiring a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. But for the followers of Jesus, the association is with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the gospels give us two accounts for that coming—the quiet immediate coming narrated in John and the more dramatic, delayed account marked by the text from the book of Acts. Certainly the description of the coming of the Holy Spirit according to Luke's account in Acts presents a vivid picture of the disciples gathered together waiting in one place. It has been some ten days since the ascension according to Luke and they have spent their time together praying. It is now the festival of Pentecost, fifty days after the Passover and the city of Jerusalem is again filled with pilgrims. "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue of fire rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." In this scene, what is often overlooked is that the disciples gathered in that room together when that wind and those divided tongues of flame appear suddenly are also suddenly not in that room anymore. Instead they are out in that Pentecost crowd gathered in Jerusalem, that crowd gathered from every nation under heaven, and they are speaking to them in their own language. The text gives us a rundown of the many nations of the Jewish Diaspora represented in the crowd. It also tells us what message the disciples were proclaiming: "in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." Of course, there were some in the crowd who were doubters; skeptics as there always seem to be. This text ends with Peter getting up and addressing the crowd to debunk that claim but stops before his impassioned proclamation about Jesus Christ, his mission and resurrection. But it is clear that the coming of the Holy Spirit has had a profound effect on the disciples...they are no longer remaining in a room but are out and about. And in this narration the story has already been given, has been planted much like the scattered seeds in one of Jesus' parables to be taken back to many different lands. Two texts—two presentations of the coming of the Holy Spirit—one quiet—one dramatic. Both texts give us images of the Holy Spirit; ways of envisioning God's Spirit as it comes to us. Actually when we envision the Holy Spirit in the quieter mode it is usually in the form of a dove, which does not appear in that particular John text but is frequent elsewhere. It is one of our favorite images. It is one of comfort. An image associated with peace—much like the peace which Jesus gives before he then tells them of his sending them out to complete the mission that he was given. That quieter giving of the Spirit, although it came more immediately to the disciples, does not seem to have spurred them to activity as rapidly as the more dramatic arrival described which occurred fifty days later. The images of the delayed arrival of the Holy Spirit are wind and tongues of fire which result in the immediate

changes demonstrated by the disciples moving out of a single room into the public square. Part of the tradition which has caused the faithful of the Jewish Diaspora to gather is to celebrate the festival of the first fruits and the giving of the Law to the people at Mount Sinai. It is a part of the paradox of this first Pentecost that those who gather to celebrate the gift of the Mosaic Law now hear of this gift which the God has now given—his son sent to redeem them. A gift which Peter will soon proclaim in his first speech in the public square that some will continue to reject, but many will accept. And it is from this proclamation that the good news of the risen Lord will truly begin to spread to the ends of the earth because of those who have gathered to celebrate their traditions. It is another interesting paradox that although we tend to prefer the narration of Pentecost from Acts, the images of the Holy Spirit from Acts are not as comfortable for us. Those images are much more powerful. The movement of the Holy Spirit as narrated throughout the Book of Acts is not restful; it is not peaceful; it does not leave the disciples alone but totally uproots their lives and changes their world views. The winds of the Holy Spirit and the tongues of fire which come to rest upon them causes them to change their view of others, to change how they interact with others...with Samaritans, with Gentiles....with all that they encounter. And we really don't like that kind of wind blowing through our lives....we do not like change, in fact, we fear it. Wind and fire are not only powerful images—they are powerful realities in our world. When the crowd heard the disciples speaking in the different languages they asked, "What does this mean?" It seems that we might need to ask again that question what does it mean for the Holy Spirit to come into our lives with power, with the sound of a mighty wind blowing through us and to have tongues of fire rest upon us so that we might proclaim and witness to the teachings of our Lord about loving one another, about caring for the marginalized, to come to know those who are not like us, to learn of others so we will not fear them, so that all can partake of the life abundant. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.