

Breath or Wind and Fire?

Today we are lifting up and celebrating a tradition we have honored since early in the history of this institution we call the church. We tend to associate this text with the origin of the church, calling it the birthday of the church. And it is okay to do that but we need to remember that for Luke who wrote the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the church is not the end of the story. The church represents the vanguard of the Kingdom, of the realm of God that is both coming and yet to come. For Luke the focus was on what God was doing and sending others to do. Often we human beings tend to focus on what the humans in the passage do and what history records about their activities...which the title of Acts reveals as all the events within it record how the Holy Spirit, let loose among them transforms them and everything they thought they knew about God and each other. What Acts actually describes is the activity of the Holy Spirit among them. In our considerations of the arrival of the Holy Spirit we most often relate the Acts 2:1-21 passage, probably because of the drama associated with it. Because many readers of this story have just focused their attention on the phenomena of the day—the spooky details of wind, fire and amazing speech and results when Peter speaks in the public square—they and we have missed much of what Luke is trying to reveal with the story. Close reading reveals the emphasis of the account is less on those memorable details than on the response of those who hear. The focus is on what happens to those disciples and those international Jews who experience the noise that fills the house, the speaking of the community in diverse and understandable languages. That sound is *like* a strong wind, which is not exactly a wind itself, and the “tongues” *compared* to fire are not exactly fire itself. The use of these modifying words are like those often used by the prophets...like Ezekiel, who rarely if ever said precisely what he is describing. What Luke does is paint a rather vague picture of extraordinary occurrences which happened on that day in Jerusalem. Luke is urging those listening not to dwell on the “what happened” of the event but to consider the results of it. The point of Pentecost then and for us is the transformation of those disciples; that dispirited lot who ran headlong from the trial and crucifixion of the Lord to huddle together into bold proclaimers of the “great deeds of God”. Those peasant Galileans, who denied the Master and their Teacher, though their new leader, Peter, vowed never to do so, are now heard in the streets proclaiming in all the languages of the world gathered there the story of God’s power revealed through the divine son Jesus. This transformation has occurred because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, that Spirit given back into the hands of God by Jesus at his crucifixion at his death. That Spirit has now fallen on or entered the disciples of Jesus, and they are ready to assume their commission, ready to carry the story of their Lord to the ends of the world. Their work begins at Pentecost when the resurrection of Jesus has made possible the transformation of the disciples who will in turn experience the power of the Spirit and make possible the transformation of the world.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit is described in two places in our scriptures. These descriptions of the event have only two things in common—the transformation which happens and that the arrival comes when they are together. In John 20:22 where the Spirit arrives at Jesus’ words: “Receive the Holy Spirit” when he appears among them on that first day when the tomb is discovered open. There is no mention of dramatic sound or fire, but only Jesus giving them the

blessing of his Shalom—Peace be with you as they have now witnessed the reality of his resurrection. Luke’s narration not only is more dramatic but it occurs later, after Jesus has spent time with the disciples and then while ascending into heaven blessing them and then sending them out with the news of God’s kingdom from Jerusalem to the ends of the world.

In his Pentecostal sermon, Peter slightly changes the quotation from the prophet Joel from the Septuagint which is the Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible where in Joel 3:1 the verse reads “In the last days, it will be, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” As Acts 2:22 declares Peter proclaims “After these things, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” For Peter it is now after these things because what is happening at Pentecost is the beginning of the great time anticipated when God brings all human history to consummation through the ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, despite the success of Peter’s speech it is clear that like is narrated in each of the four gospels, not all who experienced Jesus’ presence and teaching in person recognized his identity so not all will experience the resurrection in the same way. Some do not or simply cannot believe, so despite the miracle at Pentecost all that some can conclude is that these who are ecstatically hearing the gospel spoken to them are in fact drunk. Though Peter scoffs at this claim, he defends his statements through connections to Jewish traditions based in past interventions of God into human history. Peter laces his defense of the Pentecost experience with sharp connections to the story of Moses. There are many from the diaspora present who have come to celebrate the giving of the Torah on Sinai and fire was the symbol of the Torah and the pillar of fire led the Israelites through the desert time of Exodus. For many in this international assembly of Jews this Pentecost is like none they have previously experienced and many join the community of faithful at this time. As we consider this text we can see that at the beginning of both the ministry of Jesus and the church, Luke will show us how deeply grounded the new covenant is in the old one. Jesus does not explain his ministry without turning to Isaiah; Peter turns to Joel. The understanding of the relationship of the growing church to Judaism in Luke and Acts is a much disputed issue. What cannot be disputed is that neither Jesus nor the church is comprehensible apart from Israel’s story and Israel’s hope. For this reason this Acts text is often understood in connection with the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. The scripture narrates that God confused and diversified human language so that the whole earth no longer “had one language and the same words.” This is viewed as God’s punishment for human pretension and pride which built the tower. However, a careful read will reveal that Pentecost did not really reverse Babel. It is a misreading to conclude at the end of Pentecost all the earth—or even all believers—will have one language. The miracle present at Pentecost is that even though there are still many languages and diverse words being spoken—the difference is that people are able to understand one another. God’s promise is not that we will all speak the same language but that the Spirit will lead us in our diversity, through our diversity, forward toward understanding each other and God’s vision for humanity. It is important to notice that when believers first speak and understand each other using those diverse language they do not lift praises for the diversity, they focus on praising God. Diversity is a blessed feature of Christian life, but it is not the center of that life. The model given in Acts is to bring diverse people together to praise God not congratulate ourselves on our diversity. So what is the important message for us today? Perhaps it is to notice two other important words used here: when and then. Both the test

from John and Acts begin with when and contain then or imply a then. For each when there is a then...When the day of Pentecost had come...When they heard the sound, they came on the run...so what is the "when" in our lives? What are our whens? When will I be more attentive to God's leading? When will I experience God inside the room with me, not outside? When will I love more deeply? When will I arrive? When will I be more disciplined with my time? When will I give more of myself to others? When will I respond to those who suffer in a personal and committed way? Yet the "whens" are not just about me as an individual but are about all people—those inside the room, those who ran to hear and see and those who do not. Some of these are: When will others know God as a God of love, peace and mercy? When will God's presence in other religions be revealed and understood? When will asylum seekers be released and when will they be welcomed? When will suffering be ended for those who are ill? When will the song of the birds and wonder of creation remind us of God's goodness? When will communities learn to live openly as well as exclusively in their uniqueness with translucent, transparent and transforming walls which build other communities as well as value their diversity? When will the hungry be fed? When will the leaders of nations have greater wisdom? Within the passage today there is a "then" for each of these whens...the answer to the when is the then of the transformation which comes from the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit within. I suspect that we don't spend much time with those "whens" in terms of what they are seeking from us. I suspect that we hear this story just well enough to believe that the promise of Pentecost is deliverance, celebration, victory and strength. After all the signs and story of Pentecost are mighty, full of wonder and power. Except the basis is the promised Holy Spirit is the presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ. Because this is so we should never expect things to be so easy. In the cross of Christ we see God's strength mediated through suffering, God's victory achieved through defeat and new life pledged and promised through death. The crucified and resurrected God we see in Jesus is a God of paradox so what else would we expect to find in God's Holy Spirit. We often view the Holy Spirit as the provider of solutions for our problems. Looking at the disciples' lives following Pentecost it seems as if the arrival of the Spirit did not solve their problems but created them. After all, if the Spirit had arrived to transform them, they could have just gone back to Galilee and resumed their previous careers as fishermen. The Spirit's arrival propelled them to go throughout the ancient world to herald the unlikely message that God had redeemed the world through an itinerant preacher from the backwaters of Palestine who was executed for treason and blasphemy. The Holy Spirit, take note, doesn't solve the disciples' problems, it creates them. Another paradox is while we seek comfort and aid for ourselves, the Spirit propels us out to acts of witness and service for others. This brings us to the realization that no matter how the Spirit enters a life, through a breath or through a dramatic revelation, what follows the when is a then that is transformation. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.