

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
May 23, 2010

Acts 2:1-21

Dream a Little Dream

Pentecost

Today is Pentecost in the Christian Church. Pentecost means 50 days. It was first a Jewish festival that happened 50 days after Passover. The Jewish Pentecost celebrated the giving of the Ten Commandments through Moses to the Hebrew people.

As we hear this story from Acts, we know Jews from all over the middle east of that day were living in Jerusalem and were in the midst of celebrating Pentecost...Jews who were of many countries and spoke many languages and had different cultural customs, but who gathered as one people to celebrate Pentecost.

Part of the group of Jews who gathered in Jerusalem on that day were the followers of Jesus from Galilee including Peter, who just 50 days ago had experienced the resurrection of Jesus following his brutal execution. In these 50 days Jesus had appeared to them and broke bread with them; and then as he went back to God, Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. The Holy Spirit would give them the power to be witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 2:1-21 "The Message" by Eugene Peterson

1-4 When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

5-11 There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"

14-21 That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk—it's only nine o'clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen: "In the Last Days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams. When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit on those who serve me, men and women both, and they'll prophesy. I'll set wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billowing smoke, the sun turning black and the moon blood-red, before the Day of the Lord arrives, the Day tremendous and marvelous; and whoever calls out for help to me, God, will be saved."

It's quite the scene, isn't it? Gale force winds blowing through a house that still stands. As Peterson tells it, the Holy Spirit spread like wildfire. In another version it says tongues as of fire rested on each person; and most surely a cacophony of sound filled the air as all these languages were spoken. Each person heard their own language...heard these earthy Galileans speak so that

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
May 23, 2010

everyone present could understand. “They’re drunk” was the cry. Have you ever been in a crowd of people who are drunk? Are they not usually very loud? It seems an apt assessment to me. It is then Peter steps in and says no—they are not drunk.

Wind and fire are symbols for Pentecost, but more so for this elusive thing we call the Holy Spirit. Even those of us who have been going to church most of our lives find it difficult to comprehend how this event could have happened. We live in a world where we want proof. The ancients lived in a world where the story was believed, for to them the wind and fire possessed what we now consider properties of liquids. This is why the scriptures speak of the spirit being “poured out.” The ancients believed this elusive spirit was real; and the rushing wind and tongues like fire made it all the more tangible.

Theologian and pastor, William H. Willimon, says “The Holy Spirit is the engine that drives the church out into the world.” Today we speak about search engines and an internet super highway. Can we grasp the Holy Spirit as an engine? Scripture speaks of a force at work in the world, an invisible force that is compared over and over again to breath and wind. Hebrew and Christian scripture names this creative force “God” and the Holy Spirit is an expression of God.

In the book of Genesis it says, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Native Americans call God the Great Spirit. We often describe the pulse that moves humankind to action the spirit of humanity. God is spirit and the Holy Spirit is the power by which God acts in human life.

In this story that Peter quotes an ancient Hebrew text—a text from the prophet Joel that speaks of dreams and visions. “I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams.” The Holy Spirit will be poured out on every kind of people. The Holy Spirit will stir us to dream and vision.

The story in Acts goes on to say that 3,000 responded to Peter’s vision. They were baptized and signed up, committing to a life together, and pooling their resources so that each person’s need was met. We know that wasn’t the end of the story. We also know that it wasn’t easy for that early band of dreamers.

A mythical story about the day Jesus arrived in heaven after his earthly life says Jesus found his way into the presence of God. After welcoming him home, God asked, “What finally happened? What did you do to ensure that my dream for the world would finally come true?” And Jesus told of how he had gathered some fishermen, a tax collector, some women and a few others and had taught them everything he knew and now had entrusted them with the dream. God then asked, “And what happens now? What if they fail? Do you have a backup plan?” And Jesus replied, “There is no backup plan; I am counting on them.”

While our world would be unrecognizable to the ancients, the human condition would not. They would see there are issues of justice that still need to be solved. They would see that hunger and loneliness and alienation from God and one other plague our world as well. I believe from the

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
May 23, 2010

realms of the world beyond they watch our world and they hope we will not let the fire of Pentecost go out.

There is no back-up plan—God’s plan is now in our hands. We, humankind, are the ones who are filled with the Spirit and on whom God is counting. But the challenges we face can seem overwhelming. The sheer volume of information we must process, the frantic pace of life, the increased complexity of moral decision making—all these things and more make us want to get in bed and pull the covers over our heads.

In other times and places when troubles threatened to overwhelm, those who held tight to a dream found ways to get through the troubles. The African slaves used singing as a way to tell the story, but also to “pour out the Spirit” on their lives. They held on to a dream of freedom when it seemed impossible.

"There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again."

Today the Holy Spirit revives our souls. Tomorrow it will happen again. We don’t do anything to make it happen...it just happens. Our task is to wake up to the presence of the Spirit all around us and respond. We are more apt to talk ourselves out of responding—blame it on too much caffeine or say that dreams are for children or focus on all the things we have to do today. What might be possible if we lived every moment in the Spirit? We are the temple of God and the Holy Spirit lives in us.

Are we dreaming God’s dream or are we letting fear crowd it out? I dream of a Church in which every one of God’s children knows and feels the healing and reconciling love of God in Christ, no matter how broken they are, defeated they are, no matter how sick, depressed or demoralized. I dream that God’s love will be known to any and all in need, strife or affliction, and I dream that we will be the people to carry that love to the world. And now that dream needs my sweat, my hands, my passion. I am the back-up plan and so are you.

What do you dream for? What is your holy longing? Rev. James A. Harnish of Tampa, Florida, says, “The fire of Pentecost is the flame of divine love ignited within us, giving us a passionate desire to share that love with someone else.”

I heard a story of an English bishop who visited a sleepy little parish along the river Thames. The village priest was discouraged and depressed, not really accomplishing very much. Finally, the priest confessed, “Bishop, I can't say that we are setting the Thames on fire.” The bishop looked him sternly in the eye and said, “Young man, I am not the least bit concerned about setting the Thames on fire. What I want to know is, if I take you out and drop you in it, will you sizzle?”

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
May 23, 2010

Benediction

William Blake

Unless the eye catch fire, God will not be seen.
Unless the ear catch fire, God will not be heard.
Unless the tongue catch fire, God will not be named.
Unless the heart catch fire, God will not be loved
Unless the mind catch fire, God will not be known.

Young People's Time

In *Encountering God* Diana Eck describes the dramatic and creative ways Pentecost was celebrated in the Middle Ages. Some churches had "Holy Spirit holes" in the ceiling to symbolize their openness to God. On Pentecost, doves were released through the holes and bundles of rose petals were dropped from them onto the people gathered inside. Choirboys moved through the congregation making whooshing sounds and playing drums to remind everyone of the rush of the Spirit.