

Enter the Spirit

Acts 2:1-21

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

“And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they ask, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in our own language?’”

The fifty days between Jesus’ resurrection and Pentecost has been called, by some, a “significant pause” between the mighty acts of God, a time when all there is to do is watch and wait and pray, “*Veni, Creator Spiritus: Come Holy Spirit!*” We begin this morning by backtracking ten days in the church’s calendar because Ken Lovett is right: we cannot get to Pentecost without doing business with Jesus’ ascension. Forty days had passed since that first Easter morning—not forty days as we would mark them on a calendar, but forty days that recall the forty days of the flood or the forty days of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness: forty days that hold a place in the story of God’s saving purposes before the next chapter begins.

In these forty days, the risen Christ appeared to many around Jerusalem, speaking of God’s Kingdom and of the Spirit that soon would be known to them in power. Some say the story of Jesus’ ascension was invented by the early church to silence the appearance stories that continued to proliferate long after Easter morning. I think Scripture means to tell us more.

At the end of these forty days, “as the disciples were watching,” Luke tells us in the first chapter of the Book of Acts, “Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their site.” This cloud was neither a dark cumulus nimbus nor an ephemeral cirrus but a cloud that revealed, in a hidden sort of way, the glory of God. Surrounded by God’s glory, Jesus disappears into “heaven.” We have talked before about heaven being “the starting point in creation from which God moves through creation toward us,” but Jesus’ ascension puts a sort of reverse spin on heaven. According to one theologian, “The point of the story is not that when Jesus left His disciples he visibly embarked upon a wonderful journey into space, but that when he left them

He entered the side of the created world which was inaccessible and incomprehensible; that before their eyes, He *ceased to be* before their eyes.”

Even as these words come out of my mouth, I wonder what I am talking about! The story of Jesus’ ascension and the story of Pentecost are stories that stretch language to its limit in order to speak about God’s living presence when Jesus no longer appeared to the human eye. The facts on the ground are this: from wherever the disciples were gathered on the day of Pentecost, they could see their fellow Jews, dispersed throughout the known world since the Exile, assembling in Jerusalem seven weeks after the Passover to mark the giving of the law on Sinai. “Suddenly from heaven,” Luke says and means suddenly God’s Spirit was coming through creation toward God’s people. The wind and tongues of fire bring Sinai to mind; but on this Pentecost, what came toward them from heaven, from the realm of the inaccessible and incomprehensible, was the Spirit Jesus had promised.

Now just to be clear, the Spirit had been around from the beginning, moving over the face of the deep, parting the waters of the Red Sea, falling on Israel every time history was in stasis, speaking through the prophets. In every instance, Robert Jenson says, the Spirit of God, the breath of the Lord, the whirlwind of God’s liveliness, agitated whatever God turned toward. Pentecost was no exception. The disciples were agitated by the whirlwind of God’s liveliness and all of Jerusalem with them. “Filled with the Holy Spirit” (enlivened by God’s presence), each disciple began to speak in a language that was the native language of the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. Each visitor to Jerusalem heard the disciples speaking about God’s deeds of power in their own language. They understood the words and yet they were still perplexed, asking, “What do they mean?”

Clearly the significant pause between God's mighty acts had come to an end. But what in the world was the Spirit sent to be and do? Why was the Spirit necessary? Why was it not sufficient for the disciples, on their own, to tell the world the story they would tell of Jesus' remembered life, death, and resurrection to the world? Why did they have to wait for the Spirit and why do we have to do the same?

In the first place, Luke is telling us that to be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be enabled, by God, in part, to make the inaccessible, accessible and to make the incomprehensible, comprehensible. Had Jesus ascended to the inaccessible and incomprehensible side of the created world while we were simply left behind, had he not sent the Spirit from heaven to mediate the meaning of his word, had the Spirit not come to be his present-tense actuality within the community gathered by his word, "Jesus would still be for us an item of mere memory imprisoned in history." [Jenson] In particular, left to our own devices with Scripture, the story of an ancient tribe's trials and tribulations in the Middle East and the story of a first century Jew who was crucified, but then was raised from the dead, is just that. Perhaps it is one interesting story among many stories we can tell ourselves. In our adolescent years, when we spend most of the week learning about things we think we can know for sure, the story's claims can only fly in the face of our reason without someone, filled with the Holy Spirit, who can act as a mediator. As adults, inured to the Spirit by the whirlwind of our lives, we may distill a few moral principles from various sayings we like and teach them to our children. But without the Spirit coming toward us when we open this book, we are just talking to ourselves. Without the Spirit active in our midst, the meaning of the story of our lives remains inaccessible and incomprehensible. Without the presence of the Spirit among us, the Bible is no more than a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing. Come to think of it, we might as well be reading through the entire works of Shakespeare on a three-year cycle to occupy a Sunday morning if the Spirit is not

in us and among us. If ever we understand Scripture, it is the Spirit's doing!

In the second place, Luke is telling us that the Holy Spirit was poured into a disparate gathering of human being who became the bearers of God's living presence to the known world. "At Pentecost," Jens says, "the prophetic Spirit was 'poured out' to make not individual prophets but a prophetic community." "Without dissolving the variety and complexity of their backgrounds," friend and theologian Michael Welker writes, "an unbelievable commonality of experience and of understanding occurs." That was the real miracle of the day! I would add, by way of an op-ed in today's New York Times, that the experience of awe at the Spirit's presence "imbued [the crowd] with a different sense of themselves, one that [was] smaller, more humble and part of something larger." Apparently research now shows that awe "leads people to feel less narcissistic and entitled and more attuned to the common humanity they share with one another." The researchers suggest that we live in an awe-deprived culture and counsel people to seek out experiences that give them goose bumps, like camping or art. I would simply suggest trying "the necessary discipline of praise, the rhythm—the great swinging movement of dark to light—of the [church's] year...[the weekly] opportunity to meditate, express adoration, contrition, thanks, and supplication in loving and dignified communion with others" and in the awesome present-tense of God's Spirit.

The agonizing irony for me, this week, was preparing to teach and preach about this incredible miracle of understanding amid diversity given by God's Spirit at Pentecost while being a part of a what is called an Administrative Commission of the Presbytery, whose job was to negotiate the details of a division between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and a congregation that can no longer bear to be a part of the denomination. Our job was to reverse Pentecost decently and in order. In a world that more and more inhabits separate and divisive silos of political, economic, national, and cultural reality, the witness of the church most missed

may be her witness to the Spirit's gift of unity amid diversity. Since Pentecost, however, Christians have sinned against the Holy Spirit by dividing into sacred silos of the theologically like-minded. I am pretty sure I was put on the committee as the liberal and, paradoxically, I am pretty sure I was the most broken-hearted and diminished as we graciously parted ways. At the end of the day, the general feeling was that we had done God's will by being nice to each other in the process; I believe, instead, we broke God's heart and momentarily defeated God's Spirit one more time.

But if you continue reading the Book of Acts, you begin to realize that the church, especially in its institutional form, was born out of a deep and deathly division among God's people. When the people ask after the meaning of the words they heard in their own language, Peter rises to preach the gospel for the first time. His text is Joel, whose promise of God's Spirit poured out upon the diversity of all flesh has finally come to pass. Through the Spirit's mediation and so through the lens of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, Peter now comprehends, in a new way, the incomprehensible words of Scripture; the words of David, for instance, as they bear witness to the God who has come toward all flesh in the flesh of a first century Jew and now in the Spirit. Yet as a Jew speaking to Jews, he indicts God's people for Jesus' death and so sets in motion an enmity between Christians and Jews that has made the gospel a deadly bludgeon rather than a universal blessing. That day three thousand were baptized; that day at least as many walked away not convinced; that day the community who believed Jesus was the Messiah began to differentiate itself from the community that was still waiting and watching and praying.

So maybe, in the third place, we would do well to remember that Luke is telling this story to a people as divided and disheartened as we are. According to David Bartlett, they had "suffered the shock of the Temple's destruction—the loss of the symbol of God's presence with the people. They had suffered from the general disillusionment in the Roman Empire as the

promise of the great peace under Augustus was dissolved into dynastic wars in Rome and corruption and mismanagement in the provinces. They had suffered the breakup of families over the issue of Jesus' Messiahship. Some were certainly tempted to abandon the world of history and to cultivate their own private piety—if not abandon the whole religious enterprise altogether.” God's Spirit comes toward precisely this world of divisions and disillusionment still, agitating whatever God turns toward and even threatening the institutional behemoth the church has become in favor of two or three gathered. Therefore on this Pentecost Sunday, by the agitating of God's Spirit, may we more and more become a diverse community that stays together and prays together, “*Veni, Creator Spiritus: Come Holy Spirit!*”