

Today is a day of promises fulfilled, a day filled with the fresh breath of hope, a day where is no doubt that "there is a God who is busy in the world." It's Pentecost. The word "Pentecost" actually means fifty and it is the second of the three major Jewish festivals - also known as the Feast of Weeks. Pentecost occurs fifty days after Passover, and marked the time of the wheat harvest, when people would give the first fruits of their labor to God in thanksgiving for God's goodness.

Now in the days of Jesus, lots of people would have come into town, into Jerusalem, for this harvest festival. There would have been crowds - people from all over the surrounding countryside. There would have been an excitement in the air - the mood of a festival. And so with the disciples all gathered together, fifty days after they had found the stone rolled away and the tomb of Jesus empty, after they had talked and eaten with the risen Christ, and after they had seen Jesus ascend up into the heavens out of their sight, fifty long days later, 50 days of waiting ... 50 days of praying ... 50 days of wondering what they were to do without Jesus ... the Spirit of God comes down in a rush of wind and flames among the disciples. It's almost beyond our ability to imagine. What would have been going through their minds?

Let's think about that for a minute. I suspect that many of the disciples were a bit distressed when they saw Jesus ascend up into the heavens. They were probably a bit confused about what to do next, how to go on without Jesus to instruct and guide them. Some may have begun to lose their faith and others may have quarreled over who was in charge or how decisions were to be made. And so, just as they had watched Jesus - God's son and presence with them on earth - ascend into the clouds, they now watch as a rush of wind fills the house, and flames appear among them, all somehow seeming to come from heaven. God's Spirit - God's presence with them now that Jesus can no longer be with them - has come down from heaven to fill them with the grace of God. They no longer need to be confused. They no longer need to feel alone. They can be confident in God's presence with them in all that they do.

This is what we celebrate today - on Pentecost. We remember the gift of the Holy Spirit given to the disciples almost 2,000 years ago, and we give thanks for the presence of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. This Sunday also marks the beginning of the Christian Church. It's the church's so called birthday, and we are here to celebrate. But before we move too fast into thinking about celebrating and birthdays, let's take a closer look at Luke's account of this Pentecost day. Just what did happen that day? Listen again to a few of the verses from the passage: "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 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."

A rush of wind, flames of fire, and the ability to speak in languages previously unknown to them. This certainly should have caused quite a stir, and as we read farther on in the passage, it did. People paid attention. And so should we. Because God's message to the people of that day and to people like us gathered here today lies within this story. The message relates to the use of languages - how they can divide people and yet how God uses the gift of language to show what it is that can bring people together.

During seminary, I spent an internship year working in a church in Belfast, Northern Ireland, I discovered some surprising things about a language I thought I knew. I assumed that because I spoke English, I wouldn't have any trouble being understood or understanding what others said. I was prepared for a different accent, but I was totally unprepared for new words, new phrases, and new meanings to words I already knew. What I called gas, they called petrol, what I called french fries, they called chips. What I called chips, they called crisps. Suddenly a cookie was a biscuit, a car hood a bonnet, aluminum was now al-u-min-i-um, and a traffic circle a round-a-bout. It was a whole new language. Luckily, most of those words didn't come up too often in worship! But when a colleague of mine from Princeton came to visit, and was leading us in worship on Sunday, our American phrasing made a big difference. Howard was introducing the Anthem, and having heard the choir practicing before the service, he made reference to the fact that the choir was "really quite good." Now I knew exactly what Howard meant; he was saying that the choir was really very good indeed. It was a compliment to their ability and practice. But I later discovered that the saying "quite good" is not really a compliment at all in Northern Ireland; it would be like saying "quite ok". I ended up with some explaining to do to the choir!

As we ponder this story of understanding languages in Acts, we also remember the story of the

confusion of languages from the Old Testament. In the book of Genesis, the story of the tower of Babel tells how the Lord confused the language of all the earth and scattered the people across the land, to stop them in their attempts to "make a name for themselves." They were being driven by pride and sin, and God hoped that the new diversity of languages would hinder their efforts. But now, in the New Testament, Luke shares this story where all can understand what is being said in their own native tongue. There is no more separation, no division, no lack of understanding. The curse of Babel is reversed. The barriers between the nations have come down.

It must have been rather amazing to be there that day. People all talking at once, and all speaking in different languages. We might think it was the only way for the whole group gathered to understand whatever it was that the disciples were saying. But that's not the case. In fact, everyone who was there that day would have understood either Greek or Aramaic. Those were the common languages of the day. So then what was all the fuss about? What was the use of having all these different native languages being spoken by the disciples all at once? In effect, it was to prove a point. It was to get people's attention. To say, God's power can overcome all barriers between people, and it can work through all of you. Everyone there. And it got peoples' attention. But more importantly, it was God's way of showing the reconciling power of the Holy Spirit. Just as all these people can be united through this miracle of languages, so too are they united in their faith in the risen Christ. There is no longer any need for division - in Christ Jesus we are all one.

The disciples were waiting in silence for the fulfillment of the Easter promise on that Pentecost Day. But when they were filled with the Spirit, they began to speak, to proclaim, to preach, to gather people together, to worship and to do God's work. Does that sound familiar? It should! The disciples were sharing the Good News of Christ just as we are gathered here in worship. They welcomed new members into their midst, just as we welcome four new members into our congregation today. The scripture reads, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." That is what we do here in this sacred space on Sunday, as today's disciples. That is how we are called to live out the presence of God's Spirit in our lives.

The disciples were energized and ignited. They spoke out and shared their faith. Let us not be silent this day. May we be filled with energy, with passion, with love and with commitment. This is a day for speaking up, and speaking out, not a day for silence.

Not too long ago I was in Boston for a conference and had the opportunity to experience the Holocaust Memorial. I say experience instead of see, because it is most definitely an experience, and well worth a visit if you have not been there. Several large four-sided "towers", constructed of metal frames and glass, stand in a row, and you can actually walk through them. Etched into the glass are numbers ... row after row, column after column of numbers ... the numbers that were assigned to people killed during the Holocaust ... numbers as far as you can look up ... reaching to the sky. It makes you stop in your tracks. It grabs at your heart. The magnitude of so much death and hatred. And as you pause, smoke rises up from grates beneath your feet. And when you can move again, when you can somehow get yourself to accept the reality of so many lives taken, you read quotes. They are from survivors, from relatives, and from friends. One stood out so vividly that I got out a pad and wrote it down. It's a quote from Martin Niemöller, a Lutheran Pastor.

"They came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up, because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time, no one was left to speak up."

Friends, we too are indeed called to speak up. For we join to celebrate what is good and true and honest and fitting of our God of compassion and love. And we join to celebrate the fulfillment of an Easter promise: Jesus died and rose, but the Spirit is our gift of everlasting presence. It is the Spirit that causes us to fight for justice, and to proclaim freedom from inequalities. Hear the wind and see the flame. May the Spirit be alive and well in our midst. May it be ever clear that there is a God who is busy in this world ... here ... now ...through us and with us. Amen.