

The Day of Pentecost, Year A, 2011

Acts 2:1-21

John 20: 19-23

The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Today is The Day of Pentecost, a very special day in the life of the Church. This is the day that, according to the Acts of the Apostles, God gave the Church the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Acts story that we read as the first lesson this morning, tells us that the Holy Spirit came surprisingly and quickly upon the Apostles, on the day of Pentecost in the Jewish calendar, giving them the spiritual strength, courage and abilities necessary to build the Church of Christ. Now it is the story from Saint Luke's Acts of the Apostles that the Church follows in describing the Day of Pentecost and it is Saint Luke's timing that drives our liturgical calendar in setting the major feast known as the Day of Pentecost. Let me unpack that just a bit.

Without getting deep into the complexities of it, the Church decided, early in its history, that there should be seven Sundays in the Easter season, for in Judeo-Christian numerology seven is the number of completion. God created the universe in seven days, there are seven sacraments, seven days in the week, seven candles in the menorah and so forth. But the theological numbers game doesn't stop there. The number forty carries the meaning of both a long time and an adequate time. It rained on Noah for forty days, Moses was lost in the desert for forty years and Jesus fasted and meditated in the wilderness for forty days after his baptism. By the time that Saint Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, the Church had decided that there had to be seven Sundays in the Easter season for the season to be complete and therefore perfect, but they had also decided that our Lord's presence on Earth, after his resurrection, had to be an adequate period of time, therefore forty days. So, the Feast of the Ascension occurs on the Thursday before the last Sunday of Easter, which for us was last Sunday, and having dealt with that, the Church could celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Saint John's account, which we read in our Gospel reading this morning, strongly suggests a different understanding than we see in Acts, and it probably is the earlier understanding. It tells us that God gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit on the evening of Easter Day, as the Apostles hid in a room in Jerusalem, frightened and alone. As I said, the Church has followed that timing of Acts, and so it is that Luke's account drives our liturgical calendar. But the two accounts, other than the day of the Spirit's coming, are not at odds. And I think that we can blend them without distorting either. Because that which is the essence of Pentecost's meaning is that God gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Luke fleshed out the story, the gift came suddenly and unexpectedly. Our Lord's closest disciples were meeting together in a room, somewhere in the city of Jerusalem, when suddenly the Holy Spirit joined them, visibly and experientially. Luke said that the Spirit appeared as a rushing wind, followed by tongues of fire resting on the heads of each of the Apostles.

There is a theological word that explains what happened. That word is "theophany," a sudden and very visible appearance of God in a concrete way that left those experiencing

the theophany doubtless of God's presence and God's intent. So, the Apostles knew, in an instant, that they were empowered to do the work of Christ in the world and that every gift and skill needed to spread the gospel throughout the ancient world was theirs, the gifts of God necessary to build Christ's Church and reveal him as Savior of the world.

Scripture tells us that immediately the Apostles begin to proclaim the Risen Lord to any in earshot, leaning out the windows to proclaim him to the crowds in the street. And as we know, in the days, weeks and years ahead, they went throughout the known world, even as far away as India, preaching Jesus and building his Church. They had phenomenal success, and the Church grew rapidly everywhere that the Apostles went. The history of the Church is a long history, and the Church has known many problems and many challenges. But, the message today is the same message preached by the Apostles of old. It is the same message proclaimed each Sunday in our creeds. It is the message contained in our Sunday readings and hopefully the message always heard from this pulpit. The message is this: Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Lord of all the Earth. He is the Prince of Peace, the Son of God and the King of Heaven. He is the Messiah, the Redeemer. Those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God, who put their faith in him, who accept him as Lord and Savior and are baptized into his death and resurrection, have, by the promise of Almighty God, eternal life.

Many years have passed since the first Pentecost, and the Church has been shaped time and again by its history. But the essentials remain the same: one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all. The Church continues and will continue until the end of the ages because the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father through the Son, remains with us as our enabler and guide. The Church of Jesus Christ lives in and through the Holy Spirit doing Christ's work in this world. *Amen.*