

Waiting and Preparing for the Spirit

Acts 2:1-9/ 12-21

Preached b Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015

There's Christmas, Easter and then Pentecost the third major holy day on the Church calendar. The reason for both Christmas and Easter are well known, Jesus was born in Bethlehem and raised from the dead in Jerusalem. Most people also know the significance of these joyful mysteries. At Christmas we celebrate the incarnation, literally in the flesh, God becoming one of us. At Easter we celebrate the resurrection, Christ's ultimate victory over sin and death.

But what can we definitively say about Pentecost? The birth of God's son in a manger and his stepping out of the borrowed tomb are more easily grasped. But we really have to work harder to comprehend the meaning of Pentecost with all its implications.

Jesus was one of us. We can easily see ourselves walking, eating and speaking with him. And since Jesus said, "I and the Father are one," we get a pretty strong sense of God the Father. But the Holy Spirit who appeared in the form of wind and fire confuses us, so much so for many years Pentecost Sunday became a celebration of the birth of the New Testament Church instead of the Holy Spirit.

So before we go any further let's try to identify the Holy Spirit. First the Holy Spirit isn't an "it," but a "who." The Holy Spirit isn't an attribute or an extension of God but God himself. Next week on Trinity Sunday I will again, unsuccessfully, try to unravel the mystery of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but for now, let's just say the Holy Spirit is one of the three coequal persons of the Trinity.

We first hear about the Holy Spirit in the beginning when the author of Genesis was inspired to write in the opening verse of the Bible, "the... spirit of God moved over the face of the deep like a wind." Then in the second chapter of Genesis we read, "The Lord formed man from the dust in the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." (Genesis 2:6)

From these two verses we learn the Holy Spirit is revealed metaphorically in the form of wind and breath. Much later Jesus said in his conversation with Nicodemus early in John's Gospel, "The wind blows wherever it chooses, you hear the sound of it, but you don't know from where it comes or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8)

Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as God's empowering presence bringing life and empowering the Church to continue the ministry Jesus began. You may remember Jesus later promised his disciples he would never leave them orphaned. They would be left behind but not alone.

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you..., the Spirit of truth...will testify on my behalf.” (John 15:26) And then Jesus gave his marching orders, “You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning (John 15:27)

So, the plan from the beginning was this: when Jesus completed his mission on earth, after he returned to heaven the Holy Spirit would be his replacement. The Holy Spirit, as much a distinct personality as Jesus, comes to empower the Church with everything we need to bring Christ and his Gospel of justice and peace to people desperately in need of both.

Speaking of being a life-giving presence, last week I spoke briefly about the times when God appears to be absent. “Where is God when I need him most, where is God when people living under the tyranny of violence, injustice and just plain evil?” we ask.

Jesus himself cried out from the cross, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Apparently Jesus experienced the absence of God on Good Friday. Even so, Jesus kept the faith, holding fast to his trust in God. How else do you explain how Jesus was also able to say, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do,” or with his dying breath, “It is finished,” that is, he completed his task, he suffered and died for the sins of the world.

Why is it important to remember Christ’s cry of lament today on the Feast of Pentecost? Because if we are to pass on the testimony we receive from the Holy Spirit we, like Jesus, must also trust God’s presence especially when God seems absent. If we expect our call to be the Church is based on feeling God’s presence, very little will ever come from it. So instead of simply celebrating the birth of the Church on Pentecost we need to get back to celebrating the One who gives life to the Church. Otherwise we will dumb down Christianity, Christian discipleship and being a member of the Mystical Body of Christ will be a religion for fair weather friends. Only foul weather friends of Jesus need apply so we can continue what the first Christians started by then sharing their testimony and their own experiences of Christ transforming their lives.

Remember the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and today to keep us motivated individually and corporately so our lives will have purpose and our membership in His Church will have direction.

That’s why Pentecost, like Christ’s birth, crucifixion and resurrection shouldn’t be seen as an isolated event. Like a stone dropped in a pool of water Pentecost has widening ramifications that will continuously inform our faith and actions, but only if we are willing to be tuned in, overwhelmed and led by the Spirit of God.

So how do we get tuned into the Spirit? We get the answer by reading the first chapter of The Book of Acts of the Apostles. Just prior to Pentecost the disciples remained huddled in the Upper Room, this time not hiding but waiting.

Can you imagine Thomas saying to the others, “Jesus told us to wait for this mysterious person he was telling us about. But who is he, how will we know when he gets here, what if he comes and we miss him? What do we do then?”

“Thomas is right,” Peter said jumping up from his chair. “We have to prepare ourselves!”

“But how?” asked James

“I know,” said Andrew. “Remember what Jesus said something about being aware of the signs of the times, kind of like watching the sky for signs of rain? Maybe we should become

more aware of what's happening all around us right now, you know the signs of the times, people's attitudes, their needs, their fears..."

"But that's only the half of it," declared John the Beloved Disciple. "Yes be aware of the signs of the times but if we don't want to miss the coming of God's Spirit we better get on our knees and start praying so when the Spirit comes we'll be ready. What's more we might be asked by the Spirit to go places and do things we may not feel like doing because we're too afraid or feel too inadequate."

"That sounds good John," declared Peter. "How did you become so wise?"

John smirked, "Why do you think Jesus called me "the Beloved Disciple?"

Of course there's no biblical record of this conversation between the disciples while they waited in the Upper Room. But don't be too sure something like this wasn't said. How can I say that? Because conversations like this are happening in congregations just like ours today. Today the Church is facing the same challenges the Apostles faced 2,000 years ago as they tried to discern how to trust God and spread Christ's Gospel to an indifferent world.

You've heard me say several times before we are apparently living at the end of a 500 year era that started with the Reformation. The old traditions and practices of the Medieval Roman Church had run their courses and became out of sync with the times. The clarion call of the Reformation was "out with the old, in with the new."

Since history isn't linear but cyclical our generation is now coming to realize what happened five hundred years ago is about to start happening again, on our watch. But this time instead of life-changing inventions like the printing press, and the discovery of new trade routes plus the rise of the middle class we have the internet, the new global economy and the influx of immigrants from all over the world.

The Church is Christ's gift to the world but the Church isn't immune from the social and cultural upheavals they experienced then and we are experiencing today. Just as the emerging Protestant tradition of 500 years ago was led by the Holy Spirit to respond to the rapid social and political changes during the Renaissance and later the Age of Reason, the Church today has the same opportunity and challenge: following the lead of the Holy Spirit to go and do likewise as we reimagine, and revision our faith and practice as the Spirit gives birth to the newest reemergence of Christianity.

I'm hearing good reports from the leaders of our New Beginning House Groups. About 40 of our members are engaging in important conversations about our life together, our ministry together here at Babcock Church. It is hoped that from these conversations the Holy Spirit will emerge in power, as in the Upper Room on that first Pentecost, maybe not as a mighty wind and tongues of fire, but certainly in changed lives and perceptions of who God wants us to be and what God wants us to accomplish from this place for Christ and his Kingdom.

In the meantime wait and prepare for the Spirit to descend on us transforming our hearts, informing our minds and reforming our perceptions of what it means to be the Church in the twenty-first century at 8240 Loch Raven Boulevard. Why? Other people's lives are at stake and God has made them our responsibility. Let's not let them down. Let's not let God down. Amen.