

“You Think This Happened Only Once?”

Welcome to Pentecost. Pentecost is the Greek name for a feast in the Jewish calendar. In Hebrew it is called Shavuot which means “weeks” as it marks the end of seven-week period after Passover. In practical terms it marks the wheat harvest. In religious terms Shavuot marks the giving of the Torah on Mt Sinai. As things would work out the giving of the Holy Spirit came on the same day. Since Jesus is crucified and resurrected during Passover the timing is such that the holy days coincided. Because Pentecost is linked to Easter and Easter is linked to Passover which is determined by the Jewish calendar which does not match the western Gregorian calendar, Pentecost is a movable feast. It is fifty days after Easter and ten days after the Ascension in the Lukan gospel. It is also the last day of Eastertide. So our ancestors in the faith appropriated the name Pentecost for our celebration of the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Some churches mark Pentecost by reading the scripture in many languages simultaneously. Others wave banners and ribbons of red to simulate the fire that swept over the disciples/apostles. Some have birthday cakes supposing that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. There are many ways to celebrate this day. I wonder what it was like for the little band of Jesus’ followers on Pentecost.

I would like you to close your eyes for a few minutes. Take a deep breath or two as you clear your mind of the cares of the day. Imagine you are with Peter and Mary the mother of Jesus, and John and James and Andrew and Mary Magdalene and the others. It has been seven weeks since the crucifixion and resurrection. It has been ten days since Jesus ascended into heaven. Jesus said he would send a Spirit to comfort and encourage the disciples as they started on the mission to evangelize the world. Ten days is a long time to wait especially when you are hiding out in a city that is crowded for the festival.

It is morning. There is chatter in the streets as the city awakens. You have had breakfast and wonder what the day will bring when all of a sudden a sound like a wind comes over you. Everyone is startled to see flames hovering around the room eventually sitting on the top of each person’s head. Then you cannot help yourself. You begin speaking the Good News of Jesus in a foreign language. The shuttered windows are opened as you proclaim to the crowd in the streets. Others of you go out into the streets to proclaim the Good News.

Everyone you meet is amazed because you are all Galileans, which in the terms of the day means you are uneducated hick from the backwater of Palestine. You are not educated and cosmopolitan Judeans who might know many languages. Some think you are drunk. They think you are not speaking a real language just gibberish.

Then Peter quiets the crowd and explains that what has happened is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. Where Joel wrote that on the coming of the Day of the Lord, the young shall prophesy and the old shall dream dreams. Peter goes on to exhort the crowd and explain that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected. Many were convinced of the fulfillment of the prophecy that day and were baptized in the faith. Imagine for just a moment more being one of those apostles and the wonder of all that had happened that day in Jerusalem. There was the mysterious sound like the wind that swept over the deep before creation, and fire dancing around the room and alighting on everyone. Then the voices including yours, speaking in different languages. Languages you don’t understand but is understood by strangers in the

street. Imagine the exhilaration of finding you have the words and the power to convert people to faith in Christ Jesus. What a great wonder and joy. (You may open your eyes.)

This phenomenal occasion is what we recall this day. It is also the day we celebrate the receiving of this Holy Spirit in our own lives. In the Gospel of John the Greek word that is used is *Paraclete*. Paraclete does not mean Holy Spirit. It means mediator, advocate or counselor as in a lawyer. It also carries the meaning of comforter or helper. The Paraclete as Jesus speaks of her in John is the one who will abide with the faithful, especially the apostles, in the absence of Jesus. But it is important to remember that this did not just happen long ago. It happens still today.

We are each given the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism. We are each called on to spread the Good News of Jesus through our lives and our words. We are all surely apostles just as Peter, James, John, Mary and Mary Magdalene were. I have said it before and I will say it again, this does not mean we have to go out and start knocking on doors and handing out tracts. It does mean that we are to live as Jesus instructed us to live. It is as the prophet Micah wrote, “O mortal what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” if we can live this way we won’t have to knock on doors, folks will be knocking on our doors wanting what we have—the peace of God.

Of course it is not an easy task. But, as my dad used to say, “Nothing worth having comes easy.” Life is hard. We do get bumped and scraped and knocked around. Sometimes by the very people we think should be the kindest to us are the ones who hurt us most. We wear red today to remind us of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete who is with us always to encourage us, counsel us, strengthen us and comfort us. Jesus promised “I will not leave you comfortless.” Indeed we are not; there is the Holy Spirit, also the bread and wine of Eucharist, and that group of fellow believers we call the church.

I will end with a poem by Marie Howe that captures for me the mystery of Pentecost as surely as it captures the mystery of so much of our life with God.

You think this happened only once, and long ago
Think of a summer night and someone talking across the water
Maybe someone you loved in a boat rowing
And you could hear the oars dripping in the water
From half a lake away
And they were far and close at once
You didn’t need to touch them
Or call to them
Or talk about it later
The sky is what you breathed
The lake sky that fell as rain
I have been like you
Filled with worry, worry then relief
You know the wind it’s sky moving
It happens all the time. ¹

¹ Howe, Marie. *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.
Transcribed from a reading I heard online.