

## Pentecost for Presbyterians

Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017]

### I

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the third great Christian festival after Christmas and Easter.

Pentecost is related to the Jewish harvest festival Shavuot, which comes 50 days after Passover—

hence the name Pentecost, from the Greek word for “fifty”—

and which also celebrates the giving of the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai fifty days after the parting of the Red Sea.

Pentecost is celebrated in many ways around the world.

Eastern Orthodox churches hold an all-night Vigil and decorate the sanctuary with greenery and flowers.

In Italy the custom is to scatter rose petals from the ceiling of the churches to recall the miracle of the fiery tongues.

In German-speaking countries, red flowers and red flowering plants such as geraniums are common.

In Scotland the custom is to have a Pentecost parade through the streets of Edinburgh.

In the United States churches celebrate with red balloons and streamers;  
some churches hold baptisms and confirmations;  
some will do as we did last year,  
have Acts 2 read in different languages.

## II

Did you know that there are two accounts of Pentecost in the New Testament?

One is a large, loud, and boisterous celebration;  
the other is a small quiet observance.

Luke is the host of the large and loud celebration of the birth of the church;  
John is the host of the quiet and small celebration.

Luke's account, in the second chapter of Acts, is familiar to Christians everywhere.

It takes place in Jerusalem, which is crowded with thousands of pilgrims  
from all over the Roman world.

The 120 followers of Jesus gather in the upper room, and suddenly all  
heaven breaks loose.

A violent wind sweeps through the entire house...  
divided tongues of fire appear over the heads of the disciples...  
then all the disciples begin to speak in other languages.

People are astonished to hear the Gospel proclaimed in their own tongues  
and so they gather around to see what is going on.

Simon Peter stands up to preach and says,

“These people are not drunk as you suppose,  
it's only 9:00 in the morning,  
“But this is what was foretold by the prophet Joel:  
*In the last days I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh....”*

After Peter's sermon, 3000 people confess faith in Jesus Christ and are baptized.

Luke's account is Pentecost for Pentecostals—  
with howling wind and crackling flames,

a huge crowd,  
and so many languages being spoken that you think you are at a  
convention of Rosetta Stone sales reps.

Luke models his account of the birth of the church on Exodus 20 in the Old Testament.

As you may remember, in Exodus 20 the Hebrew children are at the mountain of God, Mt. Sinai.

There is a violent wind and fire and the people, scared to death, say to Moses,

“We can’t stand it! You go up there and find out what God wants and come back and tell us.”

So Moses goes up on the mountain and comes back 40 days later with the tablets of the Ten Commandments.

When Luke wants to describe the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church, he draws on Exodus 20, that powerful wind-driven moment in the history of Israel.

All over the Christian world, any congregation that desires to repeat or keep alive the experience that Luke describes in Acts 2, of whatever denomination, is called “Pentecostal.”

### III

The other Pentecost celebration is quiet and much more appropriate for sober Presbyterians like us.

It too takes place in Jerusalem, but not out in public like Luke’s version.

The disciples have gathered in a house.

The door is locked because they are scared that the same people who put their Lord to death will be after them also.

Jesus was crucified on Friday, and then on Sunday morning some of them discovered that the tomb was empty.

Now there is fear and confusion—

“What is going to happen to us?” the disciples ask.

They are grief-stricken...

intimidated...

fearful that they will suffer the same fate as their Master.

The doors are bolted shut...

the shutters are pulled over the windows.

They are nervous at what the next knock on the door could mean.

Suddenly Jesus is in their midst.

He says to them, *“Peace be with you.”*

They are still not sure who this is standing before them.

But then Jesus shows them his hands, where he had been nailed to the cross.

He shows them his side where the spear had pierced him.

They recognize him and are glad, saying, “It is the Lord!”

Then Jesus says it again,

*“Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, now I send you.”*

In other words,

*“What I have done in my life is now up to you to continue;*

*it is up to you to carry forth the work I have started.”*

And then a strange thing happens—Jesus breathes on them.

He breathes on them and quietly says, **“Receive the Holy Spirit.”**

There is no big, violent wind...

no crackling tongues of fire...

no babble of foreign languages.

There is just Jesus breathing on his followers.

It’s subdued, quiet, and it’s all done “decently and in order.”

### **Should we call this Pentecost for Presbyterians?**

#### IV

Instead of describing it in the light of Exodus 20,

the way Luke does in Acts 2,

John describes it in the light of Genesis 2:

*“Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”*

Think about this for a moment.

In the beginning, God made everything else—

squirrels,

giraffes,

snakes,

elephants,

duck-billed platypuses and all the rest.

Then God formed a person out of clay.

What if God had not imparted God's own Spirit into this being?

Then humans would be like any other animal.

Can you imagine people living like animals because they hadn't received the Spirit of God?

Just think about it: the whole of life would be devoted to eating and drinking and sleeping and eliminating and reproducing and dying—just like animals.

But God took this creature made out of clay,  
     held it up as a mother holds a baby,  
         breathed into it,  
             and it became a living soul like God.

And God said,

*“This one is like me. I am proud of the squirrel. I love the elephant, the horse is good, dogs and cats are nice, and I do like those llamas.*

*“But the one that bears my image is this one. For I have breathed into this one my own life.”*

This is why we human beings are not content with just eating and drinking and working and reproducing and dying.

Real human beings long for love and intimacy with other human beings.

Human beings made in God's image search the heavens,  
                     write poetry,  
                 play music,  
             spread art all over the world,  
         and think of the things of God.

We human beings even spend time pondering if, after we die, will we live again—

because we have received the breath of God.

This is such an extraordinary thing that the most horrible thing you can imagine is for the breath of God, the Spirit of God, to be taken away.

When old King David was hanging out in Jerusalem with nothing but time on his hands, he saw a beautiful woman who was married to another man, one of his soldiers.

David being king could do whatever he wanted. So while the soldier was out in the field, David took that man's wife and made love to her.

When she became pregnant, David arranged for the husband to be killed in battle.

Then the prophet Nathan came and pointed his finger at David and said,  
 "You are the man who has done this terrible thing."

And David realized that he had behaved no better than an animal—  
 killing, eating, drinking, and reproducing—  
 just like an animal.

Do you remember what David prayed when he asked God for forgiveness,  
 remember Psalm 51?

*"Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
 And put a new and right spirit within me.  
 Do not cast me away from your presence,  
 And do not take your holy spirit from me.  
 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
 And sustain in me a willing spirit."*

## V

And so it was that the Son of God took this small band of disciples with nothing really remarkable about any of them.

Most of them were fishermen;  
one was a tax collector;  
one, Simon the Zealot, was a revolutionary.

Jesus took this odd, unexceptional bunch and,  
just as God breathed into *Adam* on day of creation,  
breathed on them and said,  
“*Receive the Holy Spirit.*”

In that house in Jerusalem,  
as quiet as a baby’s breath,  
they received the Spirit.

And that group became the church—  
yes, they became the church...  
worshiping God,  
studying scripture,  
praying,  
and seeking to do God’s will.

They became the church, going out and serving other people—  
weeping with those who weep,  
rejoicing with those who rejoice,  
sharing one another’s burdens,  
emptying their pockets for other people’s children,  
sitting up all night with a distraught friend,  
providing shelter for the homeless,  
praying faithfully for the helpless.

Sometimes we Christians expect that the Spirit will save us,  
or at least take us away from whatever challenges threaten to overwhelm us  
in the moment.

So what does Jesus do as he breathes the Holy Spirit into the disciples?



For this is God's plan and purpose for us:  
 to care for those around us as God cares for us,  
 to make wherever we may find ourselves a better place,  
 to work for peace, justice, and reconciliation for all persons,  
 to share God's love in word and deed...  
 that others may know they are not alone,  
 and that they, too, are loved by God.

## VI

In his book, *A Christian Primer*, Albert Curry Winn wrote:

*“When my children were small, I was writing a dissertation on the Holy Spirit. You can imagine my difficulties when four little people kept asking, ‘Daddy, what is the Holy Spirit?’ We were living in Alabama in the fifties, and a great riot broke out in our town, protesting the integration of the University of Alabama. Our pastor was a very shy, retiring man. But that Sunday when he entered the pulpit there was something different about him. With a power that none of us had even seen before, he laid his job on the line—indeed, his life on the line—to tell us clearly and unmistakably that every single human being, regardless of color, is precious in the sight of God. There was a great stillness...Even my children were quiet. In the car on the way home I said quietly, ‘Now I think you know what the Holy Spirit is.’ And they nodded.”*

That, brothers and sisters, is Pentecost for Presbyterians—  
 Pentecost for people like you and me who need to be reminded of  
 how God breathes the Spirit into us in the quiet moments of life.

For when the wind of the Spirit blows, good things happen.

People are transformed,  
 wrongs are righted,  
 prejudices are overcome,  
 comfort is received,  
 hope is reborn.

Only when the breath of God breathes into us can we be the church Jesus created us to be.

Only then can we be sent forth into the world to be the hands and feet of Jesus—  
to love as he loved,  
to serve as he served,  
to be a blessing to those around us.

*Breathe on me, breath of God,  
Fill me with life anew,  
That I may love what thou dost love  
And do what thou wouldst do.*

**Come, Holy Spirit, come.**

Amen.

Sources:

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