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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday
June 9, 2019

Lectionary Year C:
Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-21
John 14:8-17, 25-27
Psalm 104:25-35, 37

The Blessing of the Holy Spirit

The dramatic reading of the story of Pentecost that we just heard—with voices of many languages overlapping, but all speaking of the same gospel—is a representation of the first Pentecost. Fifty days after Easter, when the apostles were rejoicing in Jerusalem, waiting for the Spirit that had been promised to them by Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John today, in order that their hearts would not be troubled, not be afraid. I note that none of our readers had tongues of fire appear over their heads, as in the original Day of Pentecost, but so it goes. (There is always next year, if our Lord tarries.)

Those tongues of fire that appeared on the disciples were visual representations of the fact that the Holy Spirit had been sent to the apostles to continue the work Jesus had given them, not the least of which was the proclamation of the gospel. But they were also markers of the apostles' blessing. It was a visual representation of the way that they had been adopted by God in Christ and a marker that God's blessing would be on them.

It was a motley group of bystanders who are recorded as hearing the apostles speaking the gospel of God, an unexpected group to be sure. Just to take the first few listed: the Parthians were then-contemporary military enemies of the Judeans, having defeated pro-Roman Jewish forces a few decades before. But even they understood the gospel, there in Jerusalem. But that's nothing compared to the Medes and the Elamites: the Median civilization hadn't existed for five hundred years; there hadn't been Elamites around for three hundred years.

The point for the book of Acts is not historical, I think, but theological: there is no place that the Gospel cannot go; it is meant for everyone, and thus the Church has a responsibility to share it all over the world. To give the good news of the blessing that God had made available for them from the taking. And somehow that includes not only the present and the future, but even, in some mysterious way, the past. Remember that Moses and Elijah were at the Transfiguration with Jesus. Somehow even they are caught up in life with Christ.

The inclusion of different civilizations being brought together, enemies being reconciled, is a universalist undoing of the division among nations that is recorded in Genesis. There, the attempted unity is destroyed, and the peoples are scattered. The unity that they had pursued in pursuit of their own idolatry—what they want to do is reach up to the heavens and become gods themselves—is overcome in their unity in Christ, their blessing in Christ.

But it's not only the different nations that are brought together. When St. Peter is explaining to everyone what is happening at that first Pentecost, he quotes the prophet Joel. There, the prophet talks not only about the importance of male patriarchs or male apostles or priests. Peter quotes Joel saying that the Spirit of God would be poured over all flesh, and specifically mentions that both

“sons and daughters” will have the Spirit poured out on them to prophesy; he specifically mentions that on both men and women will the Spirit be poured out in blessing.

That would be far from the only work that the Church would undertake in obedience to her Lord. From the beginning, the early Church was distinguished by its care for the poor, the orphan, and the widow. Hopefully it still is. Back at the beginning of the story of Israel, God had promised Abraham that, in blessing him and his posterity, the whole world would be blessed. Blessed, they could be a blessing: Jews and Gentiles; Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; men and women.

And young and old, it should be said. Blessed, they also can be a blessing. One of the joys of ministry here is the fact that on Fridays the Rector can spend half an hour with the pre-school and pre-kindergarten classes at the Children’s Ark, the early childhood learning center here at St. George’s. I read them a few books, ask them about their lives (and they tell me—parents, let that be a warning), and generally spend time together. Before I leave, though, I have them close their eyes, stay silent for ten seconds, and think of one person that they love very much. And they do. You could hear a pin drop in that room.

Those blessed kids: blessed, they can be a blessing. It’s entirely possible that those are the best intercessory prayers that their loved ones get all week. The Lord pours out his Spirit upon all flesh, sons and daughters as well, young and old. Who knows what the effects of those four- and five-year-old prayers are?

In them we see how the Spirit has been, is, and will continue to be poured out over the Church, like a watering can soaking the ground so that the plants can grow. The Church continues to be drenched in the Spirit. Being drenched in the Spirit, there is not much it can’t do, to the glory of God. Historical enemies can be brought together; all the nations reconciled; people young and old; men and women. All have and can have God’s Spirit poured out over them.

I mention all of this because in a few minutes we will invoke that Holy Spirit and ask that the ordinary water of baptism that is poured into the baptismal font becomes the water that drenches Charlotte and Elizabeth with God’s blessing. We won’t soak the kids with water—we are a practical people—but the water poured sparingly on their foreheads will be representative of the fact that the Holy Spirit is poured on them in that moment just as the Spirit descended and was poured on the apostles on the first Pentecost, just as the Spirit descends on all of the baptized. The amount of water we use may be sparse, but the blessing Charlotte and Elizabeth are receiving is not. It is a blessing for their whole lives—in this life and the next. “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism,” we say, “And marked as Christ’s own forever.” Marked as Christ’s own. Blessed, to be a blessing. It will be one of the most important events in their lives: the moment that they are received into the household of God and become sisters of Jesus Christ.

I hope that all of the congregation will join us for coffee hour after the service today. You get there by going through the hallway next to the Lady Chapel. As you walk through that door, look up: there is a tapestry hanging over the doorframe that depicts the tongues of fire, representing the events of the first Pentecost. Each time we pass through that door, we recreate that first Pentecost, with a tongue of fire appearing over our heads. The enemies among you; men and women; young and old; Charlotte and Elizabeth. Having been brought together by the Spirit of God, we are blessed once more. Blessed, to be a blessing.