

May 19, 2024
The Day of Pentecost, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Come, Holy Spirit, and renew the face of the earth. Alleluia.

I want to begin this morning with an invocation of the Holy Spirit from the pen of John Henry Newman.¹

Come, O Holy Spirit.
Come as Holy Fire and burn in us,
come as Holy Wind and cleanse us within,
come as Holy Light and lead us in the darkness,
come as Holy Truth and dispel our ignorance,
come as Holy Power and enable our weakness,
come as Holy Life and dwell in us.
Convict us, convert us, consecrate us,
until we are set free from the service of ourselves,
to be your servants to the world. Amen.

Today, Pentecost, is an anniversary of sorts. As a matter of fact, it is an assortment of anniversaries. Faithful Jews of Jesus' time observed a feast to mark the wheat harvest on the 50th day after Passover. Known as *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks, it was one of the three great pilgrimage festivals that drew crowds to Jerusalem. Using the Greek word for "fifty" (*penta*), *Shavuot* is also called Pentecost.

Rabbinic tradition teaches that this date also marks the revelation of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai.²

Many Christians call Pentecost the "birthday of the Church." And for us here at Grace, Muncie, today is also an anniversary. On May 23, 2021, on the Feast of Pentecost, you and I celebrated the Eucharist together in this space for the first time as we began to step cautiously out of the pandemic shutdown.

¹ John Henry Newman: (1801-1890), was an important, if controversial, figure in the religious history of 19th century England. Theologian, academic, philosopher, historian, writer, and poet, Newman was first an Anglican priest and a major figure in the Oxford Movement. Later, he became a Roman Catholic priest and, in 1879, was created a cardinal. Newman was canonized as a saint in 2019.

² According to the tradition of Orthodox Judaism, this took place in 1312 BCE.

The writer of the Acts of the Apostles tells us about wondrous events that took place on Pentecost that happened in the city of Jerusalem. But, with a nod to Charles Dickens, this is really a tale of two cities.

The first city is Babel. Although it is not named in our lesson, it's there, just beneath the surface, and the first readers of the Acts of the Apostles would not have missed it. Do you remember learning about the Tower of Babel in Sunday School? It occupies only nine verses in the 11th chapter of Genesis. Shoehorned in between the stories of the Flood and God's call to Abram, it is an example of the biblical writers trying to explain why the world is how it is.

The story starts with what was. *Now the whole earth had one language and the same words* (Gen 11:1). If you said, "bird," everyone knew bird, and rock was "rock" and sun was "sun." In the course of their migration, the people decide to build a city and a tower on a plain. We are told that their motivation was to make a name for themselves and not to be scattered across the earth.

God heard about this plan and said, "This is not good." And here's the stunning part: God said, "Nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them." In other words, if people can communicate with one another, they'll be able to do anything they put their minds to. That's how powerful the ability to communicate is.

So, to save humans from themselves we are told, God scrambled their language. Bird was no longer "bird." Now it's also *oiseau* and *avis* and *vogel*. And sun is also *shemesh* and *soleil* and *helios*. The people can no longer communicate, and they become strangers to one another. They scatter, and the city is named Babel, because it sounded like confusion and nonsense. That's city number one.

City number two is Jerusalem. Because it's *Shavuot*, or Pentecost, faithful Jews from across the known world have gathered in Jerusalem, and the city is abuzz with a multitude of languages. A modern analog might be the Indianapolis 500.

At the same time, somewhere in town, there is a group of people behind locked doors in an upper room. These are the disciples of Jesus who have experienced his death, shared meals with him after his resurrection, and, ten days earlier, watched him ascend to God.

But Jesus had told them to wait, and they are waiting...for something. Can you imagine? Being locked in...waiting...day after day? Of course you can! Remember where we all were three years ago. It is easy to understand the confusion and frustration, maybe a glimmer of anger, among those gathered in that upper room. The world they knew had changed. When could they get back to normal? And so, they wait.

Suddenly, comes the Holy Spirit. First a sound like a violent wind. Then tongues as of fire rest on each of them. And, as they are filled with the Holy Spirit, they begin to speak in other languages.

Galileans, those rubes from up north, are suddenly speaking Aramaic and Hebrew, as well as Persian and Latin, Arabic and Greek. All those strangers from every nation under

heaven can hear their native tongue being spoken. They can hear the good news in their very own language.

If you've ever traveled to a place where you don't speak the language, you know what a grace, even a miracle, that was. I remember being able to hear English from the far end of a busy train car in Copenhagen. Even though I'd never met those people before, hearing my own language suddenly made me feel less alone.

In Jerusalem on that fiftieth day after the Resurrection, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the obstacle of Babel was undone. On that day, the diversity of languages was not a curse, but a marvel. God undid Babel, not by bringing the whole world back into speaking one language, but by gifting us with the ability to communicate by speaking and by listening.

The Feast of Pentecost affirms the diversity of God's world, the richness that is the multitude of peoples and languages. Pentecost confirms as gift the ability to hear and to understand; allowing us to communicate across the barrier of language, or the barrier of strangers speaking with each other.

The Book of Common Prayer (p. 852) talks about the power of the Holy Spirit like this: "The Holy Spirit leads us into all truth and enables us to grow in the likeness of Christ." And "we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are brought into love and harmony with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation."

In the fourth century, Basil the Great wrote: "Through the Holy Spirit we are restored to paradise, led back to the Kingdom of heaven, and adopted as children, given confidence to call God 'Father' and to share in Christ's grace, called children of light and given a share in eternal glory."³

This morning, when we renew our baptismal promises, we know that, throughout the church, new members of the Body of Christ are being welcomed through the sacrament of baptism.

As the Body of Christ, we make promises to seek and serve Christ in all persons, not just people who look like us or talk like us or believe like us. We promise to respect the dignity of every human being ... because they bear the very image of God.

This way of life, this kind of love, this type of expansive welcome, looks very strange to people outside the church. It looked strange to onlookers that day in Jerusalem. Many sneered, "What's going on here? They must be drunk!"

When we give ourselves permission to work for justice and peace among all people, when we delight in diversity, and see no one as a stranger, but rather as a beloved child of God, they may well wonder what's gotten into us. They may think we're a little strange. They may ridicule us.

³ Basil the Great (330-379), *De Spiritu Sancto*.

During our time of being locked in the upper room of COVID-19 we, like the disciples in Jerusalem, wondered what we were waiting for. One of the things we learned was that God's will for us in the world extends beyond these beautiful walls at the corner of Madison and Adams.

We may have thought that shifting from serving meals inside on Sunday afternoon to providing Grab n' Go was temporary. But the Holy Spirit has used this change to open our eyes to look outside these walls in a new way, and opened our ears to listen more intently to the needs of God's world. In the last four years, we have welcomed new people and organizations into this building. At the same time, we have taken the plunge to be beacons of Christ in many places in Muncie we have never been before. I can't tell you how many times I hear someone say, "I didn't know there was a church like you in Muncie."

What's going on here? This, my friends, is the Holy Spirit at work among us, calling us to dream for the sake of the world. I don't think the dreams to which God calls us begin with "we can't" or even "we always used to." I think they start with "what if...?"

Might we fail? Yes, especially if we attempt this work on our own. But rather than let that possibility paralyze us, we're asked to pray - not for divine remedy, but for divine revelation - for a divine reminder that 'God is With Us.'

Hear again the words of Paul, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

Once more, Cardinal Newman:

Come, O Holy Spirit.
come as Holy Life and dwell in us.
Convict us, convert us, consecrate us,
until we are set free from the service of ourselves,
to be your servants to the world.

Come, Holy Spirit, and renew the face of the earth. Alleluia. Amen.