

The Day of Pentecost Year B

Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Romans 8:22-27

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

Pentecost. Why is this day so important and why does it usher in the longest portion of the church year?

Originally, in the Jewish faith, there were three festivals during which all faithful Jews were required to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. The first was the offering of the first barley sheaves during the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, Passover. This festival marked the beginning of the harvest season and remembered the passage of the Israelites out of the Egyptian captivity. The second festival was the Feast of Booths, in which the Jews remembered the time when their ancestors lived in tents, or booths, temporary housing during the Exodus. The third great pilgrimage festival was the Feast of Pentecost. This feast marked the fifty days after the Passover and the beginning of the offering of first fruits. It was the end of the week of weeks, the end of the seven weeks from the Passover. By the time Jesus walked among us, this festival took on a second meaning - the remembrance of God giving the Law to Moses at Sinai. Jewish sources claim that the original pronouncement of the Law was a single sound. As the sound went forth, it was divided into seven voices and then into seventy tongues so that every people received the Law in their own language. The Law was meant to express God's will and guide the people of Israel. I say originally because, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, new forms of these festivals were created as there was no longer a place to offer the appropriate sacrifices.

Since the Feast of Pentecost was one of these pilgrimage feasts, we see a large number of Jews and Jewish converts in Jerusalem for this festival. All devout Jews tried to make it to Jerusalem, no matter where they lived. Thus, we read in Acts how people from all over the Roman Empire were in the crowd that day.

Christians look at Pentecost in a different light than the Jews. While recognizing the duration of fifty days, it no longer looks back to the Passover but to the Resurrection. This celebration marked the beginning of a new era in the Church, hence it has been called the birthday of the church. Here, after the disciples had spent time in isolation, getting the organization ready, God poured out the Holy Spirit upon those gathered in the upper room. The commotion attracted a lot of attention as the disciples spilled out of the house into the streets. The onlookers were amazed that these ignorant Galileans were speaking to them in their own native languages. There was no explanation for this phenomenon. There was no reason, nor opportunity for these people to learn all of these languages, yet that was what they were experiencing. This expressing of God's will in everyone's own language must have brought the rabbinic tradition of the seventy tongues to the mind of these faithful Jews. So great was the impact of this spectacle that 3000 people were baptized and added to the church that day.

The experience of this event and the reaction of those in the city caused an excitement in those early disciples and propelled them to go out into the world to proclaim the gospel. Instead of hiding, they were emboldened to follow the command Jesus had given them. The work of the church had begun.

This same Spirit propels us in our work. While we may not experience a great rush of wind and flaming fire, nor experience the phenomenon of being able to speak in all different languages, the Holy Spirit does equip us with the tools we need for ministry. Those tools might include the ability to cook wonderful food and sew beautiful quilts. They might include the capacity to spend time in quiet prayer for the needs of our community and the people we meet. Whatever tasks God places before us, we are gifted with the tools needed to carry out those tasks. The same Spirit that inspired the disciples, and startled the crowds, is here to motivate us to do the work God has given to us. On this Day of Pentecost, as we remember the events of long ago, let us also remember the challenges and gifts God has given us.