

Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Happy Birthday! That may seem to be a bit of an odd announcement, but it is on the mark. Pentecost celebrates the birth of the Church, the day on which God's Spirit breathed life into the body of Christ.

I wonder if Pentecost has an inferiority complex. After all, it is one of the three big days of the Christian calendar. Christmas gets more than its share of attention.¹ Easter, the biggest day of all, may not get as much attention as Christmas but at least it gets the giant crowds in the pews. But Pentecost . . . alas, no crowds, no special services, little more than just another Sunday.

In recent weeks, we've been talking about the Church, this unified fellowship that God has created and of which we are all part. Pentecost marks the birth of the Church. Until Pentecost, Jesus' disciples are a group of believers striving to understand what has happened and where this Jesus movement is headed next; but they are not the Church. Until Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would be sent by the Father after Jesus' departure (see John 15),² has not arrived. Until Pentecost, the disciples are simply waiting.

¹Interestingly, based on the evidence we have, it seems that Christmas wasn't even celebrated by Christians until at least 200 years after Jesus. The Christians were Easter people.

²You'll recall that we began the "United. Unlimited." sermon series with the promises and prayers of Jesus' on the evening of the Last Supper, before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus tells his disciples that it is a good thing that he is leaving because when he does, the Father will send the Spirit of truth, the Comforter—the Holy Spirit.

At last

After Jesus' ascension (his return to the Father), the believers returned to Jerusalem to wait. There, they stayed together and devoted themselves to prayer (see Acts 1:12-26). They also had to restore the circle of Jesus' closest disciples to twelve by replacing Judas Iscariot. Just as there were originally twelve tribes of Israel, the inner circle of disciples had to be twelve, representing the restored Israel. So they cast lots (rolled dice!)³ and Matthias was added to make twelve again.

Pentecost

This weekend is the celebration of Pentecost, which has its roots in ancient Judaism and is still observed by Jews and Christians, though you'll see that there is a very big difference.

In the Jewish calendar, Pentecost, customarily called the Feast of Weeks, was the second of three major Jewish festivals, held between Passover (in early spring) and Tabernacles (in the fall). For the Jews, Pentecost was an agricultural festival, during which the community would show gratitude to God for the first fruits from that year's crop, i.e., the early harvest.

Jesus was crucified during Passover in the spring. After his resurrection, Jesus spent about six weeks with various groups of disciples, teaching them and preparing them for his return to the Father. Jesus promised that after his departure, God would send the Holy Spirit to be their comforter and advocate. Jesus' disciples were to wait in Jerusalem for the arrival of the Spirit.

The Festival of Weeks, Pentecost, came soon after Jesus' departure. Because Pentecost was such a major festival, Jerusalem was stuffed with Jews from all over the Roman empire. In Acts 2, Luke tells us that the disciples were gathered together on the day of Pentecost in a room near the temple, when there was a sudden sound "like the rush of a mighty wind" and tongues of fire leapt from disciple to disciple. The crowds were astonished at this, each person hearing in his or her own language the disciples' proclamations of God's great deeds.

This outpouring of God's Spirit marked the beginning of a new age. The disciples were new creations in God's kingdom and the Holy Spirit would forever be God's empowering presence in their lives. Indeed, the rest of Acts tells the story of how the Holy Spirit guided and directed the growth and development of the early church. Though we refer to Luke's book as the Acts of the Apostles, it really ought to be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. And God's Spirit is today, for each us, God present with us, empowering us all to do God's work.

The believers prayed and waited, but I wonder what they thought would happen next. Jesus had said that the Father would send them the Spirit, who would teach them everything and remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26). Whatever the believers imagined, I doubt it quite measured up to the dramatic reality of that Pentecost day.

The believers were all in one place on that day. It was early, about 9am. Suddenly, there was the sound of a huge wind and tongues of fire leapt from believer to believer. These were theophanies, dramatic manifestations of God. God was suddenly with them in a way that God had not been with them before.

The Spirit, God-present, then gave each believer the ability to proclaim God in languages they couldn't know. It would be like me suddenly preaching Sunday's sermon in Russian. What they said wasn't gibberish; rather, it was the undoing of the multiplicity of languages following God's destruction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). It signified the restoration of God's creation, which God had already accomplished in Christ though it was not yet fully consummated.

Peter, now empowered and led by the Spirit, then rose to speak to everyone within shouting distance. You can bet that the commotion caused by the believers and their astonishing language skills had drawn a big crowd from the throngs in Jerusalem for the festival. Peter began by invoking the words of the prophet of Joel, for what was happening that morning was not merely a fulfillment of what Jesus had promised the disciples, it was a fulfillment of the story told by Scripture. Indeed, God in the persons of Jesus and the Spirit, had stepped into space and time to restore and renew his creation, as God had promised he would do. The Day of the Lord had arrived. It might not have looked like what everyone imagined it would but God's victory over sin and death had been won, shaking the cosmos to its very core.

Yet Peter wasn't done. The man who had denied Jesus three times only weeks before, would go on to deliver a shocking indictment of his fellow Jews. But more about that next week!

³The casting of lots put the decision in God's hands so far as the believers were concerned.

The Spirit as Evidence and Guarantee

The evidence

It is hard for us to grasp the significance of Pentecost because we're not even sure what we mean by the Holy Spirit. It is tempting to simply embrace the Spirit as a godly force of some kind, an electrical grid of sorts that we can plug into. But that isn't even close.

The Holy Spirit (a.k.a. "the Spirit," "the Spirit of God," "the Spirit of Christ") is not a "what" but a "who." The Spirit is God. Not the Father and not the Son, but still God. Fully and completely God though not all of God. The Spirit is every bit as personal and genuine and God as Jesus is personal and genuine and God. In Acts, we are told about people who lie to the Spirit (Acts 5). Who lies to electricity or even to their dog? We lie to other persons.

It is in Paul's letters that we most clearly see the relationship of Easter and Pentecost. Paul refers to Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Likewise, the followers of Jesus are the "first fruits of the Spirit" (Romans 8:23). "First fruits" is an agricultural metaphor referring to the beginning of the harvest. Both Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit marked the coming of God's kingdom, which has arrived already but has not yet been consummated.

Like Jesus' resurrection, the arrival of the Spirit during the festival of Pentecost was direct evidence that God's new age had dawned. Likewise, Paul's own experience of the Spirit and the experiences of other Christians was evidence that in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God's work had come to its climax.

The guarantee

Though Jesus' resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit are the first fruits of God's harvest, we want to know when it is all going to be consummated. When will suffering, sickness, sin, and tragedy be swept away? Paul is no fool. He knows that there is much wrong in the world. But he sees the Spirit as the guarantee that all will be put right – that, not only *will* God's victory be won, it *has* been won!

Here are three striking statements from Paul about the presence of the Spirit being a guarantee. Paul writes, "When you believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance . . ." (Ephesians 1:13-14, TNIV). Again, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30, TNIV). And, "But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment (2 Corinthians 1:21-22, NRSV)."

In the ancient world, letters were sent on a piece of rolled up papyrus that would often be marked with the seal of the sender. If the sender's seal arrived intact, then the recipient could be sure of the sender and confident that no one had opened the letter. The Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to everyone who has faith in Jesus, is God's seal on each of his people, marking us out as belonging to God.

But the Spirit is more than a seal, the Spirit is also a down payment, a first installment on all of God's promises. It is a bit like the old lay-way plan. The store would hold the merchandise as payments were made, guaranteeing that the item would one day belong to the customer.

The experience of Pentecost was not limited to the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. Every Christian experiences a Pentecost of his or her own, for all Christians are empowered by the Spirit of God. Some Christians have a very powerful experience of the Holy Spirit while, for others, it is a quiet experience. But the Holy Spirit seals us *all* for God. We who have faith in Jesus Christ have all been "born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAY 11 – MAY 17

Monday, Ezekiel 36:26-28 Ezekiel promises a day when the God's Spirit would be with us, even in us.

Tuesday, Isaiah 63:7-14 God's presence, his Spirit, saves.

Wednesday, Luke 3:21-22; John 1:19-34 John the Baptizer, the Spirit, and Jesus' baptism

Thursday, John 15:26-16:15 At the last supper, Jesus' teaches his disciple about the Advocate, the helper, the Spirit.

Friday, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20 Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that collectively and individually they are God's temples, made so by the Spirit. The temple was where God was present with the Israelites. The Spirit is God-present.

Saturday, Galatians 5:13-6:10 The behavior of those who are called in freedom to live by the Spirit.

Sermon Notes

Get the Monkey Off Your Back:

Making Sense of Creation and Evolution

The current *Something Else* series on Sunday mornings

The debate around issues of creation and evolution isn't going away. Instead, it seems to get more and more heated, with a lot more talk than understanding. In this series, we'll try to make sense of the debate and see that Christian truth claims are not at odds with scientific claims.

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning.

Today: Understanding Intelligent Design Next Week: Four Christian Approaches

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence in our lives. Even in our prayers, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, expressing to God what we cannot (Romans 8:26-27). Yet, for many of us, God's Spirit is relegated to no more than a still, small voice, robbed of any real power. When do you most see or feel the Spirit at work in our congregation? How can we go about fostering a life of the Spirit at St. Andrew? How can we foster a life of the Spirit in our individual Christian walk? What role might the spiritual disciplines – inviting, worshipping, learning, praying, caring, giving, serving -- play in this?
2. It can be very hard for us to grasp and to know that God's Spirit works in each of us. Sometimes we can allow ourselves to "tune out" God's Spirit so completely it is as if we are tone-deaf! You see, the Spirit does not do his work by magic. The Holy Spirit works with each of us, but not as if we are mere puppets. This is about cooperation and will and discipline. What can we do to help each other and ourselves to trust in God's Spirit and to embrace the power, passion, and purpose that is God's gift to us? Here's a hint. The immediate follow-up to Pentecost was this: "They (the believers) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Jesus disciples did not sit around passively waiting for the next ecstatic experience. They went to work.
3. I grew up in the Episcopal Church. In our liturgy, we'd use the phrase "Holy Ghost," not "Holy Spirit." This phrase had the advantage of seeming more personal to me, but, of course, I'd usually end up imagining a person like Casper! Understanding Jesus as a person is easy for us. Understanding the Father as a person is usually pretty easy, even if we end up visualizing an old guy with a beard. Of course, we shouldn't try to visualize the Father, but I suspect that many of us can't help it from time to time. But the Holy Spirit is a different matter. I find that many Christians have great difficulty thinking of the Holy Spirit as a person. Do you agree? Why might this be so? What are some concrete steps we can take to help us relate to God's Spirit as a person, not some impersonal force?