

Sermon: Pentecost

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year A

Numbers 11:24-30

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Acts 2:1-21

John 7:37-39

It seems that talking about the Holy Spirit... is like talking about the fog that settles in the marshy areas on the south side of I-96 early in the morning... before the sun burns it off... it's like talking about the steam that escapes from boiling water... it's like our breath outside on frigid winter mornings... we can see it... but we can't grab hold of it... Jesus told Nicodemus that those born of the Spirit are like the wind... and we don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes... when we talk about the Holy Spirit... we risk being discounted by those who give credence only to what can be seen and measured and quantified... and even those of us who have been touched by the spirit... may ask how we can rely on something that we have experienced in only brief moments... like an elusive butterfly...

I've seen fog... and steam... and my breath... I've even saw my uncle's spirit a few hours after he died... but I've never seen the Holy Spirit... and I don't know what it would it look like... in today's reading... the Gk. doesn't say that the tongues were fire... but that they were like fire... so this literary form is describing something that really can't be described... and it points to something transcendent... so more than what the Holy Spirit looks like... is what the Holy Spirit does...

In John 10:10... Jesus said... *I have come that they may have life... and have it abundantly*... and this abundant life is transcendent... like the mist or steam or breath that can't be contained... according to St. Basil the Great... the Holy Spirit raises our hearts to heaven... guides the steps of the weak... brings to perfection those who are making progress... enlightens those who have been cleansed from sin... shines on our souls so that they become a source of grace for others... and empowers each of us to achieve our own natural end...

But before we look to that end... we need to turn and look towards our beginnings... the Twelve Tribes of Israel were formed at about 2,000 BCE... and were composed of Jacob's sons and grandsons... these people would have identified with the idea of gods bound to their own particular cities... and these tribes would have practiced sacrifice to appease their gods and avoid their wrath... but in the seventh century BCE... when Deuteronomy was written... there was a theological insight among the Jewish people... a brilliant flash of light... expressed in the Shema... [in Hebrew]... Hear O Israel... the Lord our God... the Lord is One... they realized that there was only One God over all people and all Creation...

This insight is similar to one that Paul had... though many have overlooked it... and in his book Paul and the Faithfulness of God... Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright helps us see it...

After Luther... he wrote... many thought Paul's great idea was "justification by faith" over and against "works righteousness"... but Wright believes the great and supreme idea of Paul... is that the new temple of God... is the human person... and Wright thinslices the texts and finds a golden thread... and once you see it... you cannot not see it...

You see... Solomon's Temple was built around 950 BCE... and on the day of the dedication... described in 1 Kings 8: [10-13]... the Shekinah... the glory of YHWH... manifest as fire and cloud from heaven... descended and filled the Temple... just as it had once filled the Tent of Meeting... described in Exodus 40: [34-35]... this became the assurance of the abiding and localized divine presence of YHWH for the Jewish people.... and naturally made Solomon's Temple... at least in Jewish thinking... both the center... and centering place of the whole world... when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple... the place where God lived... in 587 BCE... and took the Jews into exile... it prompted a crisis of faith...

People like Ezra and Nehemiah eventually convinced the people to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple so that God could be with them again... yet Bp. Wright points out that there is no account of God's Shekinah ever descending on this Second Temple... and this Second Temple is the only temple Jesus would have ever known and loved...

The absence of any visible Shekinah then... must have been a bit of an embarrassment for the Jewish people... Bp. Wright says it could explain the growth of Pharisaism... the belief in Jesus' time... that if liturgical... moral... and purity laws were obeyed more perfectly... then the Glory of God would return to the Temple... the Jewish people tried so hard... but the fire never descended... and they must have wondered... *Are we really God's favorite and chosen people?*... and this is the common pattern in moralistic religion even today... the idea that only our impurity keeps God away...

Knowing this... gives an even deeper meaning... to what we just read in Acts... because on that day... there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind... and tongues of fire descended... not onto a building... but onto people... who received the Holy Spirit... and spoke in other languages... Paul understood this... and spent much of his life drawing out the immense consequences...

And in that moment... Christianity began to see itself as a universal... rather than a tribal or regional religion... which is why... as early as 108 CE... they called themselves "catholic"... which means universal... that's why in 1 Corinthians [3:16-17]... and 2 Corinthians [6:16]... and Ephesians [2:21-22]... Paul says over and over: "You are the Temple!"... and all of this... morphs into his doctrine of corporate humanity as the very Body of Christ [in 1 Corinthians 12:12-30]...

So when we realize that all people are made One in the Spirit... just as those who wrote the Shema realized that there is only One God... we realize that we and all of creation

are interconnected... and are inextricably bound to each other... [which... by the way... is what quantum physics says too...]

The Prophet Joel... is quoted in today's reading from Acts... and we need to remember... that the scenario Joel describes isn't the end of time... it's imagery that's associated with the dry desert wind... which fills the sky with dust... and marks the transition between the dry summer and rainy winter seasons in both ancient and modern Israel...

And the festival to which Gospel refers... is the Feast of Tabernacles... or Booths... which originally celebrated the end of the harvest... but over time... also came to commemorate God's protection of the Israelites in the wilderness... as part of this festival... the priest would draw water from the Pool of Siloam... and in procession... return through the Water Gate... and circling the altar... pour the water on it as a libation... a drink offered to God...

When Jesus says: *Let anyone who is thirsty come to me...* as the Word's incarnate presence in the world... he gives new meaning to the water-libation... and just a few chapters earlier in John... Jesus is speaking to that Samaritan woman at the well and says: *The water that I will give will become in them... a spring of water gushing up to eternal life...* at least he's being consistent...

But did you notice that v. 39 says... *for as yet... there was no Spirit...* John is not denying the Spirit of God present in the Jewish Scriptures... John is not denying that the Spirit of God descended on Jesus at his baptism... he's simply saying that the Spirit... as it is known in the church... did not yet exist...

It used to be... that when things didn't go well... people could blame one of their gods... after the Shema... people could blame the One God... but now that we understand... that the Holy Spirit has descended on each and every one of us... now that the Holy

Spirit has made us One... now that the Holy Spirit has empowered us to do God's work in the world... we can no more point blaming fingers up to heaven... than we can point blaming fingers at our parents... we need to be responsible for who we are now... and move on from here... it's time... as our Presiding Bishops have said... to Wake Up and Grow Up...and in the Resurrection... in the Ascension... and today on Pentecost... God empowers us through the Spirit... to make all things new...

And so instead of asking what the Holy Spirit looks like... I think it's more meaningful to ask what the Holy Spirit does... which is also to connect us and help us to see that our covenant of faith is also a covenant of fate... we're all in this together...

Jesus says that living waters flow out of believers' hearts... so what are we thirsty for... just clean water... what about an end to environmental degradation... an end to poverty... to hunger... to disease... to a reliance on fossil fuels... what about an end to inconsistent access to education... and an uneven application of justice...

And in what foreign languages will we begin to speak... what about the language of compassion... of forgiveness... of peace... of respecting the dignity of others... these are languages that will enable us to see each other... the way God sees us... we can do these things... the Holy Spirit empowers our hands... to do God's work... as the Talmud says... we are not obligated to complete the work... but neither are we free to abandon it... but we also need to realize... that before it's all said and done... there will continue to be suffering in the world... so we also need to hold tight to the realization... that God wants to... and can... and will... heal every hurt... and redeem every situation... for God's own good... and for that we say... Amen.

Mike+