May 19, 2013 – The Feast of Pentecost

© Jean E. Mornard

Happy birthday!

Today, the Feast of Pentecost, is considered to be the birthday of the Christian church. This day, 2000(ish) years ago, in Jerusalem, is the day the business of bringing the Gospel to all the world actually got underway. According to Acts, in the 10 days between Jesus' ascension into heaven and this moment, the disciples had been busy, but not particularly visible. They spent a lot of time praying in the old familiar upper room, they chose a replacement apostle for Judas Iscariot, and they managed to gather together about a hundred and twenty followers.

They weren't hiding out like they had been before Jesus' resurrection and appearance to them, but they weren't out in public yet, either. They were waiting. Waiting for the Holy Spirit to come to them.

And boy, did the Spirit come! She came in a Steven Spielberg-worthy display of pyrotechnics, that left no room for doubt, just in case they were wondering how they'd know when the Spirit arrived. They knew, and the whole city of Jerusalem knew.

There are three noteworthy events that happened that morning, leading up to a fourth. The first is the rushing wind and tongues of fire. Being a geek about some things, I had to look up wind in Jerusalem. Of course I don't have details for the year 33, but it would appear that Jerusalem is just not that windy a city. In my wanderings through Wikipedia, I found a reference to a windmill that was built by a wealthy British Jew named Moshe Montefiore, which was a resounding failure because there wasn't enough wind to power it.

But even if they were used to the occasional windy day, Luke doesn't say that there actually WAS wind, merely the sound of it. We in South Dakota are used to rushing wind, so this event wouldn't particularly surprise us. It would, however, raise an eyebrow or two to HEAR a violent wind on a perfectly calm day.

The second event, almost concurrent with the sound of the wind, was the tongues of fire, which filled the whole house, and rested on each of them. This must have been startling, to say the least. I have always thought, along with many other people, that the disciples were in the upper room when the Holy Spirit came upon them, which has never made sense to me. How did they all fit in there? And how did they suddenly get outside so everyone could hear them speaking in foreign languages?

I finally saw a commentary that suggested that the house being referred to in this story might have actually been the Temple – the House of God. That would explain how they all fit, and how there were a lot of non-disciples around them. This was the time of the Jewish feast of Shavuot, where people came from all around to bring the first fruits of their harvest to the Temple. Though there were always Jews in Jerusalem from all over the Middle East and Asia Minor, there was always a bigger crowd during the Temple festivals.

So it was in this setting that the third event happened. The disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in languages they didn't know. It's here that we realize that though the languages they were speaking were foreign to the disciples, they were not foreign to the crowds of residents and visitors to Jerusalem who heard them speaking. Bear in mind, the main group of disciples were mostly Galileans – fisherman and country people. They might have known a little Greek, which was the one language everyone had in common, but mostly they only new Aramaic.

Yet, here they were, speaking in French, Russian, German, Hungarian, Finnish, and Portuguese. As a result, we get that funny little crowd scene; what in the movies they call a reaction shot. Luke tells us that all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

The stage is now set for the fourth, and for us, the most significant event. Peter stands up, raises his voice, and addresses everyone there. Think about that for a minute. Peter! Peter who barely spoke two words to anyone but Jesus in any of the four Gospels. Peter who followed Jesus over the water, then lost his nerve and sank. Peter who denied Jesus three times.

How did this guy become the cornerstone of the Church? The simple answer, of course, is by the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter went from being a devoted but largely silent follower of Jesus to a fearless and charismatic preacher of the Gospel in the space of mere moments.

And what a preacher! Our reading for today only scratched the surface of Peter's great sermon on that first Pentecost. For another 20 verses, he alternates between quoting Scriptures and exhorting his listeners to listen to follow Jesus, in the finest homiletic form. He even starts by making a little joke about not being drunk because it's only nine o'clock in the morning!

Using the scriptures as illustration, he quickly relates the story of Jesus' earthly ministry, the manner of his death and the Jews' part in it, his resurrection and subsequent appearance to his disciples, and his rising to take his exalted place at the right hand of God. He neatly sums up with one pithy sentence: "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

At the end of this masterful piece of preaching, many people were, as Luke puts it, cut to the heart, and three thousand people were baptized that day. That's quite an altar call!

The point of bringing all of this up is not that Peter became a fabulous preacher in an instant, but that he preached, period. Before the arrival of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the other disciples had prayed and talked to a few individuals, but at Pentecost the fire of the Holy Spirit impelled them to move out of the relative safety of their upper room, out of their inner circle, and certainly out of their comfort zone. The Holy Spirit impelled them to ACT.

This is the reason we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost today. We already know that we have all received the Holy Spirit in our baptism, and that we are members of Christ's body. We know that we have all received gifts of that Spirit. In Acts, Luke covers those events in four verses. Then the rest of today's reading, and the entire book of Acts, for that matter, deals with acting – with going out and preaching the Gospel, with healing the sick, with caring for the poor. All those things, in fact, that Jesus has called us to do.

The disciples were told to wait for the Holy Spirit to be sent to them. We have no such excuse. The Holy Spirit is here, now, and she is calling us to action, in our community and in the world. The Holy Spirit breathes life into Christ's body just as God breathed life into Adam and Eve. The Holy Spirit touched the disciples with holy fire on that first Pentecost, and she touches us with that same fire today. It's up to us whether we quench that fire or let it spread.

I like the way Theodore Roszak puts it in a poem from his book, *Where the Wasteland Ends*:

Unless the eye catch fire,

The God will not be seen.

Unless the ear catch fire

The God will not be heard.

Unless the tongue catch fire

The God will not be named.

Unless the heart catch fire,

The God will not be loved.

Unless the mind catch fire,

The God will not be known.

We start by catching fire ourselves. Let us allow ourselves first to be consumed by that holy fire, and the joy and excitement that it brings into our lives, and then let's spread that fire wherever we go and to whomever we encounter. Don't let the flames die out because of fear, or busyness, or indifference.

In the words of the ancient hymn:

Come, Holy Spirit, Creator blest,

and in our souls take up Thy rest;

come with Thy grace and heavenly aid

to fill the hearts which Thou hast made.

Amen