

A Church Is Born – May 24, 2015

Acts 2

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As you know, today is Pentecost. Our reading this morning from the book of Acts tells about what happened when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in Jerusalem. Sometimes we mistakenly think that this event points to the birth of the Spirit. Now that Jesus had left the premises, suddenly the Holy Spirit seems to appear out of nowhere to take his place. But as we shall see, that's not really the case.

Our New Testament Lesson this morning was one of the more colorful stories in the Bible - full of lots of action and drama. The disciples were gathered in a house where they were staying together while in Jerusalem. As this was the Lord's Day, more than likely, they were all gathered for prayer and worship. Without warning, there came a noise like a great and violent wind. Then in the midst of this fierce wind-like noise, the fireworks start. Luke, the writer of Acts, describes the scene as tongues of fire, alighting on each of the disciples. And as this occurs, each person becomes overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience, and begins speaking what seem to be strange languages.

Now as you well know, everyone likes a good show. We all get a little nosy when something out of the ordinary happens in the neighborhood. All it takes is a police siren or commotion in the area, and everyone comes out on the front porch to check out what's going on. There are lots of people in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost and suddenly a crowd is drawn to the noise emanating from this otherwise normal home. Word begins to spread through the streets that something is happening. The disciples stream out of the house, animated and excited. Whatever has happened to them has caused them to continue speaking out with strange words. Some in the crowd are bewildered by their display.

Others are quick to assume that the disciples have been drinking and are simply acting foolishly. But still others in the crowd get caught up in the excitement. They aren't sure what, but something important is going on here. And they realize that these strange people have something special to share. They somehow understand that God is at work in the middle of this otherwise chaotic scene. Something happens to them. Suddenly their minds become open to this extraordinary message from God, and they begin to hear what is really happening. Somehow, the words start to make sense to them. And they want to know what it all means.

Then out of the confusion, Peter stands up and addresses the crowd. A sermon is preached. The invitation to discipleship is given, and about 3000 persons ask to be baptized. The church is born.

Now when we hear this story about the Holy Spirit coming among the disciples in the rush of a violent wind, anointing them with tongues of fire, and causing them to speak strange languages, we assume that this is the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus left the scene some 10 days prior when he ascended into heaven. And now the Holy Spirit came to take up where Jesus left off. Did the Spirit just come out of nowhere?

Well sometimes that's what it seems like. But Pentecost is not about the birth of the Holy Spirit; it's about the birth of the church. The Holy Spirit has been around since before Creation, and has been active in the world. But up until this moment in time, most people had been completely oblivious to this aspect of God. The Spirit was there, but few seemed to notice. Or few seemed to have the capacity to notice.

This is the same Holy Spirit who initiated Creation. From the book of Genesis, hear these words "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, Let there be light; and there was light." This same Spirit who breathed the breath of life into Creation, now breathes the breath of life into the church. The Spirit has been active through all time.

So then, what was the point of the drama? Why do we have this incredible tale of the Spirit's arrival, chock full of Hollywood special effects. The intense sound of a windstorm, the dramatic fiery tongues, which put the disciples into a frenzied state resembling drunkenness, the crowds of dubious and amazed onlookers. What's going on here?

Throughout Israel's history, the workings of God on earth never happen by chance. God's timeline is very orderly, and if we examine this situation more closely, we can understand why this occurrence happened when and how it did.

This event occurred during the Festival of Pentecost, which took place 50 days after the Passover. In Israel's history Pentecost began as an agricultural celebration. The community would come together to celebrate the first harvest of wheat, offering thanks to God for the bounty. It was one of three annual festivals for which every male Jew within 20 miles came to Jerusalem to celebrate. So like the Festival of Passover, the city of Jerusalem would be filled to overflowing with pilgrims.

Over time, Pentecost began to be recognized as a celebration commemorating God's gift of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. When Moses was up on the mountain receiving the stone tablets of the Law from God, he was surrounded by smoke, thunder and fire. These things – smoke, thunder, fire - signified the presence of God. If we compare that scene with what is described in the Book of Acts, it is easy to see the connection; the Holy Spirit comes amid the sounds of a loud, rushing wind along with the tongues of flame.

Now let's look at the two festivals together – Passover and Pentecost. For both Jews and Christians there is special meaning associated with these. In Israel's history, Passover symbolized the Exodus from Egypt, freedom from the bondage of slavery, and then 50 days later, the Hebrew people received the gift of God's Law. For the Christians, the Passover marked the time of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, which resulted in freedom from the bondage of sin, and now 50 days later, they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The parallelisms are no accident.

Let us also look at the situation of the disciples. Jesus has been crucified, resurrected and now he has ascended into heaven. Left in his wake is this small band of people - fishermen, tax collectors, and other working class folk. Just average men and women. But in common they were all followers of Christ. They lived, prayed and worshiped together. Realistically, there was not much they could do. They had a story to tell, that much is certain. But they were just regular people. Who would believe what they had to say?

Before he ascended, Jesus told them to stay together in Jerusalem and wait for the power of the Holy Spirit. After that, he said, they would be his witnesses to all the ends of the earth. And this is the key. This is the point. On their own, they could not be expected to accomplish much. Only through the power of God could this small group of people eventually reach out to all the nations of the world. And thus the power of God came, in a very mighty way.

The Holy Spirit was not quiet, sneaking in the back entrance, trying to find a seat in the dark, after the show had already started. Oh no. When the Spirit descended upon Jerusalem, everyone took notice. What was once a small group of disordered disciples, in an instant became the church, the Body of Christ on earth, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This was the inaugural moment of Christ's church. And it deserved quite a bit of fanfare.

Let's look again at the crowd that had gathered around the house where the disciples stayed. Some folks scoffed at what was happening. In their minds the disciples were just a bunch of drunkards, carrying on a bit too much during this particular festival. Yet there were many others in the crowd who were open to the message of God. In the strange words that the disciples were saying, these people heard the truth. The Holy Spirit had opened their hearts and minds and gave them the ability to discern reality. Thus when Peter stood up to preach, they were ready to receive the message. By the end of his sermon, Luke tells us that 3000 people asked to be baptized into their fellowship. And from that point on, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church continued to grow.

You see, times had changed. Before Jesus came, the Israelites had the Law. It was through this list of "do's and don'ts" that the Jewish people had their covenant with God. When they fell away, the prophets, inspired by the Holy Spirit, came to stir them up again and get them back on the right track. But that never seemed to work for very long. They'd just fall away and start breaking God's law again.

Then Jesus came into the world. According to gospel writer John, Jesus had been around since before Creation. But finally in one moment of time, God decided to put on human flesh. And Jesus came and told the people about a new law, a law based on love. Love of God and love of one's neighbor. And he brought with him a new covenant. A covenant sealed in his blood. And when it was time for him to leave the earth, he gave the gift of his Spirit. And with that, he also gave to us the capacity to recognize and receive that Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been around eternally. But until Jesus made the introductions few people knew of the Spirit's presence.

The birth of the church at Pentecost reminds us that the power of the Holy Spirit is always present and always available to us. All we need to do is to be receptive. But on this particular day, Pentecost, some 2000 years ago, it was time for a new beginning. It was time to begin spreading the message of Jesus Christ into all the world. And thus, with a dramatic entrance, the Spirit officially came into the community of faith. On that momentous day the Holy Spirit turned a small band of disciples into the church of Jesus Christ. No human power could have done that.