

Sermon, 27 May 2007—The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104; I Corinthians 12:4-13; John 20:19-23

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Today is the Feast of Pentecost, the final day in the arc of the Easter season. God raised Jesus up from the dead, but that is an incomplete gesture if the Church is not brought to life. God put his seal on Jesus' ministry by bursting the seals of his tomb, but that is a mere formality if the Church is not empowered to continue what Jesus began. God defeated sin and death, but that is a performance art if the Church cannot show that it no longer fears them and no longer lives by them. Pentecost does not mean that Easter is over. Every Sunday is to be Easter to us. Easter is the first fruit of the crop that the warm wind of Pentecost is blowing to ripen: humanity fully alive.

Pentecost simply means the fiftieth day—that is, the fiftieth day after the beginning of Passover. Once again, we Christians are hitching a ride on a Jewish festival; and, as we cannot understand Easter without understanding Passover, so we cannot understand Pentecost without understanding the Feast of Weeks. Notice first the perfection of this design in Jewish eyes. The Sabbath, the rest God Himself enjoyed on the seventh day and which he enjoined on his worshippers, is enlarged to be observed in weeks and years.

Every seventh year—the year which would be the Sabbath if we were to count seven years as a week of years—is the year of rest and restoration and remission. Jews who have sold themselves into slavery to other Jews are to be freed, debts are to be stricken from the record, and the land is to lie fallow for a year, having earned its rest. But the seventh time around that cycle, after the forty-ninth year, the *fiftieth* year is the Year of Jubilee, in

which *everything* is to be restored and freed and given its peace: slaves freed, debts forgiven, property returned to original owners. Today is the *fiftieth* day: seven full weeks have gone by since Passover. This Feast of Weeks, as the Torah calls it, was the early summer harvest festival when gifts of grain were brought to God. These offerings were always occasions of bounty and feasting: all those present joined in the banquet to celebrate God's blessing. Once the Temple was built, Pentecost became one of the pilgrimage feasts, for which devout Jews would journey to Jerusalem to observe the festival in the Temple. That is why so many people from so many countries were gathered in Jerusalem on the day the Holy Spirit poured out courage and power; they were celebrating the early harvest, the first full crop after the spring celebration of first fruits. Remember, we are at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, not in Minnesota; they would think summer here runs late.

Already, by the time Luke was writing the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Pentecost had taken on other meanings; it had also become a commemoration of the giving of the Law on Sinai. We read in the Book of Exodus that, after their departure from Egypt in the middle of the first month of the year, the People of Israel reached the wilderness of Sinai in the third month of the year and camped at the foot of that mountain. This fifty day interval would fit that chronology. What the People of Israel witnessed at Sinai was thunder and fire and smoke covering the mountain's peak and in that darkness the sound of blaring trumpets so loud the people trembled. They purified themselves and assembled before the mountain, and then God spoke directly to them, for the first and only time, and what God said to them was the Ten Commandments. The two chapters that narrate the arrival

at Sinai and God's uttering of the Ten Words were appointed to be read in the synagogue on the day of Pentecost.

The other designated reading for the Feast of Weeks in the synagogue lectionary was the Book of Ruth, a story of harvest. Ruth was a young Moabite widow of a Jewish man, who accompanied her mother-in-law Naomi home to Bethlehem. There, impoverished, she goes out to glean in the fields for stalks of grain. Strategy and charity and social obligations combine until a wealthy relative of Naomi offers his hand in marriage to her, and Ruth, a Gentile, becomes the great-grandmother of David.

Already, you can see how the Hebrew stories deepen our assessment of the day of Pentecost two thousand years ago. The harvest anticipated by the first fruit is being gathered in; the power shown and pledged in Jesus' Resurrection bursts open into a wide waving golden field of conversion. The manifestation at Sinai converted huddled ragtag slaves into a nation, as God descended to meet those he had chosen and to give them shape. Fire descends with violent noise, the crowd who witnesses the event reacts with emotional turbulence and alarm, and words from heaven articulate a new way to live. The gentler story of Ruth is a story of welcome for Gentiles, of provision for the destitute, of making a new home among strangers through conversion—what the early Church meant to so many. The deep layers of Pentecost resound with the claim that God is acting in our life as God acted in the past to call and to empower and to create something new in our midst.

Whenever I preach on Pentecost I find it necessary to say what I am about to say. We think of the miracle of Pentecost being the gift of tongues, but that is not the miracle. Remember, the babbling of the disciples seemed to be nothing more than drunkenness to many. How could these huddled ragtag bumpkins from Galilee know languages from around the known

world? Luke tells us that what astonished and converted the crowd was their ability to hear, in their own tongue, accounts of God's mighty deeds of power. This is the miracle: the life-changing recognition in the listeners that they were hearing about God active in human life, the quickening of repentance and hope, the shattering dislocation that what they were hearing from others, so strange and fantastic, could be true about them as well.

These are God's goals for us all: to reconcile and restore all things, to unite and renew all Creation in Christ. The purposes of God were furthered, not by the ecstatic exclamations of the disciples, but by the conviction and transformation of the listeners. Luke tells us three thousand were converted that day and joined the followers of Jesus, devoting themselves, he says, to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers, just as we also have devoted ourselves to them. All the consolation and energy and laughter and hope bubbling up through us is not the miracle; that is God's normal bounty which we return in thanksgiving as we harvest it. The miracle is that those around us, who do not know what we know, recognize that God is active in us and might be so in them. Five loaves and two fish are multiplied to feed five thousand, eyes blind from birth are opened, the dead are called back to life, and we are stretched beyond anything we could expect or count on. When Jesus, in John's Gospel, gives the Holy Spirit, he tells his followers it is so that they can release or retain sins. This gift is known in its effect on others. To retain sins is to remind them of the distance between us and God. To release sins is to fulfill the purposes of the Incarnation: that we and God might dwell in each other for eternal and abundant life. Our actions do not accomplish this; the Spirit, moving through us like breath, arrives at its sanctifying action in them.

Notice also that the various members of the crowd heard all this each in his or her own language. God arrived in them in ways they could understand. They were not required to grasp some strange new speech, whatever the disciples were shouting and chortling. They were not expected to catch words like “narthex” and “chasuble” and “aumbry,” which sounds like speaking in tongues to most folks today. Instead they heard Good News in their own language, with all its resonance and playfulness and depth and comprehensiveness, with its history and worldview and limitations, in *their* language accounts of God they had yet to come to experience.

Never underestimate the cunning of God. If I can understand it in my language, then that means it is possible in my life. The mighty acts of God become, then, a future I can move towards. If I can hear and grasp, from my own perspective, that you had hope in illness, forgiveness in divorce, acceptance during loss, cheerfulness in hardship, generosity and dignity under attack, that you encouraged others when you yourself were suffering, that you comforted others when you felt despair, that you rested in trust when the last cables of your security were cut away, then I might begin to want what you have, knowing that this doesn't seem possible to an empty unaided human being. My faith is confirmed, then, not by what happened to you, but by what I move towards finding true in my life as well.

When Moses, cowering before the burning bush on Sinai, asks God for a sign, God, cunning again, says the sign will be that the people of Israel will worship him on that same mountain. Notice: the sign is not in the past, but in the future. The sign is neither a special power given to Moses nor a handy talisman that he can carry and display. The sign is what will happen as a result of his ministry, on Sinai, in the cataclysmic covenant event the Jews remembered and the Holy Spirit recapitulated on Pentecost.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that Easter completes its arc today. The presence of the Risen Christ is God's unequivocal declaration that Jesus' ministry is to continue and that what opposes it has no power. The religious hierarchy intended to crush it with accusations of sinfulness; their confident contempt was shown to be hollow. The political apparatus intended to defeat it with a judgment of death; their efficient dismissal was proven nerveless. He is risen!

But he is risen to raise us not in an unknown future, but now. He is risen to summon his own to follow him. And we only know for sure that we are following him when our lives bring about what his life did: consolation and welcome and healing and forgiveness and hope. The miracle is not how you feel; the miracle is how others feel because of you. The miracle is not what you say or do, but what others come to say and do because of you. The miracle is not your arrival at the exuberant bliss of salvation, but the arrival of others at relief and strength and the love of God because of you. That is the miracle of Pentecost: all, whatever their background, heard in their own words, accounts of the mighty acts of God. Their conversion is our harvest festival, their confession of faith our covenant at Sinai, their commitment to our common life our welcome of a Moabite widow who will become the ancestor of men and women after God's own heart.

May we join them in their praise of what God has done and their readiness to participate in what God will do, so that we can join them giving voice to every creature under heaven, in all their multiplicity and variety and complexity, to praise their Creator, and Redeemer, and Sanctifier, who is our Eternal Source, our Only-begotten Word, and our life-giving Spirit, one God, this day and for all eternity.