

Pentecost, Year B

The Rev. Dr. Darcy Williams @ Emmanuel Chestertown

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Readings: Acts 2:1-21

Ps 104:25-35, 37

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

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

With these words from the beginning of the 2nd chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the familiar story of the first Pentecost.

I have to admit that I cannot give you a rational explanation for what the disciples experienced that day. I cannot explain a sound like the rush of a violent wind. I cannot explain seeing divided tongues, as of fire. I can't even give a good explanation of how the disciples all of a sudden were able to speak foreign languages with fluency so that the visitors to Jerusalem from all corners of the earth were able to hear them in their native languages. Or whether the miracle was that all those in Jerusalem from all parts of the known world, people who had come to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Weeks, were able to hear and understand the disciples as though they were speaking in the native tongue of each listener.

Jesus told his disciples in his final discourse that we heard part of today that there are things he had not told them because they weren't ready to understand, so I don't feel too bad about not being able to explain in rational terms what happened that first Pentecost. If the disciples who spent 3 years with Jesus day and night weren't ready, well then who is?

But the real story of Pentecost is not the wind or the flames, or the newly found proficiency with foreign languages. The real story Pentecost is the story of being filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the story of transformation, of a gift so big, so powerful that it could not be contained.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures we have story upon story of God pouring out his spirit on his people. Abraham received the spirit of God and the promise to be the father of many generations. Moses met God in a burning bush and received the God's spirit to lead the Israelites out of captivity. In the midst of their 40 year journey through the desert God bestowed a portion of the spirit he gave to Moses on 70 of the elders. God's spirit was also poured out on Joshua, Samuel, David, and Solomon and the prophets who received the spirit of God and carried God's message to the Hebrew people.

Finally God's spirit became palpable in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As he approached his final days on earth, he promised his spirit would be with his disciples always.

The Day of Pentecost celebrates the fulfillment of that promise. Something extraordinary happened that day. It was as if the heavens were torn open again, and God's mighty word descended in a rush of wind. 120 men and women who had been hiding for the better part of 50 days all of a sudden found the strength and the power to go out into the world and to share the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Men and women who were on the verge of returning to their homes and families, to their lives as parents, fishermen, farmers, trades-people, and shopkeepers, all of a sudden were empowered to go out into the world to proclaim the Good News of the risen Christ. They felt alive, virtually on fire, bursting with energy, excitement and a renewed sense of

purpose. They remembered how excited and energized they were after their first mission trip when Jesus was still alive and sent 70 of them out to teach and preach. They remembered Jesus' parting words to them as he ascended into heaven: to go out and make disciples of all people. They remembered all he had taught them.

When I think of the Pentecost story and the journey from Good Friday to this day, I am reminded of a book by Anne Lamotte, (*Help, Thanks, Wow. The Three Essential Prayers*). In it she describes in her own funny, insightful, and perceptive way what she has learned about prayer, and especially how our prayer can really be just three simple words, words that form the title of her book: Help, Thanks, Wow.

As the disciples saw Jesus led away by the soldiers and then crucified, surely their lives were consumed with only one prayer: Help. They prayed in fear that they would not be next. They prayed in heartbreak and mourning at the loss of the friend, their teacher, their leader. They prayed in disappointment and guilt. Could Jesus have avoided this end? Could they, should they have done more, or followed someone else? They prayed for forgiveness and a way forward.

Easter Sunday came. Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them. Not once, not twice, but time and time again over 40 days. Thanks! Thank you for still loving us, even though we don't understand it all, and don't deserve it. Thanks for coming back to be with us. Thanks for showing us your hands and feet, and for breaking bread and eating fish with us. Thanks for continuing to teach us, for opening our eyes and our minds, and for showing us the way. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

But it was Pentecost when those prayers of help and thanks turned into WOW. Lamott says "wow is often offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, when we can't think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction, of a sudden unbidden insight or an unexpected flash of grace. . . . Wow is about having one's mind blown by the mesmerizing or the miraculous. . . ." What better prayer for the disciples to utter that first Pentecost than WOW as they were filled with God's grace descending upon them like a violent wind! What better prayer than WOW as they felt alive, inspired, and aflame with the desire to share everything they knew about Jesus and his message of love!

We are the modern day recipients of God's grace in the power of the Holy Spirit. We gather today not just to remember that first Pentecost, but to celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit to us HERE. NOW. THIS day and EVERY day.

We feel the presence of the Holy Spirit every day in this community that cares deeply for each other and actively participates in sharing God's all-powerful, all-encompassing love. Yes, the Holy Spirit is alive and well. With the disciples we also pray: HELP, THANKS, and on this Pentecost, WOW! Amen.