

“Lawyer for the Defense”

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(Acts 2:1-4; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-11)

Pentecost Sunday

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What do we get on Pentecost? High octane energy and huge symbols rooted in the Old Testament: a sound like a tornado and tongues of fire. Overwhelming theological language: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.” And one big surprise: the followers of Jesus began to speak in other languages and no Rosetta Stone courses.

A word about the energy: Pentecost is so frenetic and so loud. No wonder it makes Baptists nervous. An “Amen” makes us jump. If someone raises their arms in praise, we are ready to run. Is it at least odd that good Ohio Christians instinctively raise their hands in other kinds of praise? O H I O!!!! Well, Pentecost is really not all emotion, all the time. Here, let me show you.

Pentecost is a continuation of OT stories. When we open the file labeled PENTECOST, OT images are crammed in everywhere. Pentecost is like Creation: “A wind from God blew over the face of the waters.” Pentecost is like the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. Moses ascended Sinai and descended with the Torah, the law that was to be the way of life for God’s redeemed people, fifty days after the Hebrews were free of Egyptian slavery, so Jesus ascended to heaven, and on the fiftieth day of Easter, sends the Holy Spirit to be the way of life for God’s redeemed people.

Solomon built the temple it was filled with the glory of God. Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord returning to the Temple. The OT prophets saw all the people of the world drawn to the Temple to hear the word of God. And so, year after year God’s people trudged to the Temple in hopes that God would be there in all of God’s glory and it didn’t happen. Pentecost says that God has arrived in all of God’s glory and this is a new creation. The Lord is in the house.

There’s no reason to be afraid of Pentecost. It’s not just an emotional event, a spiritual high for the private use of Christians. This is God doing what God always does: giving life and gifts, sharing joy, and creating understanding among all people.

So what happened? “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and divided tongues of fire.” This is known as an Epiphany and these divine entrances are all over the Bible. Sometimes they are sneaky and subversive, “I did not know the Lord was in this place”; others times they are out in the open and miraculous. God works both ways, but God is in the house. Pentecost is God’s work. The wind of God blows where it wills. God’s fire bursts out as it pleases.

And guess what? Here comes everybody – shoulder to shoulder in the house of God. Well, the Spirit has her work cut out for her if she thinks she can get all these churches to understand one another. The way churches act today, you couldn’t drag us all to a free steak dinner at the Pine Club.

But on Pentecost, to a church prepared by prayer, God fills the entire house where they were sitting – just like in Solomon’s day. The wind and the fire come to the church gathered in

worship. Pentecost immerses the church in the life of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost puts the fire of God in our minds and our hearts. “Wisdom and largeness of heart.” And the Spirit drives the church into the street to proclaim the truth. Whatever God does in church is for the sake of the world. We can’t keep it for ourselves. It will rot and decay in our hands. Well, the Holy Spirit has her work cut out if she thinks she can get the church to stop being selfish. We tend to think church is for us, what we want, what we need.

But see, Pentecost put Holy Spirit and church together as partners for life. This is why the church affirms, “We believe in the Holy Spirit; one holy apostolic catholic Church.” To be catholic is to be concerned with the whole treasury of faith and the various gifts God has given to the churches. And we really need to recover this catholic spirit.

Now, it is precisely at this point that Pentecost can have meaning for us. We live in a confused world of competing interests. And Luke shows us that Pentecost is the way to communicate truth and create understanding in the world. Once upon a time, the citizens of Earth attempted to build a tower to heaven. What’s with empires that they insist on building towers? This early Tower of Babel reveals the human desire to take the place of God. Once again, Babel defines our world. Pop philosophy tells us we are the masters of our own fates. Here a god, there a god, everywhere a god – pick one. “Try this. It will make you happy.” Everyone has a story and all stories are equally true. All facts are skewered to meet an agenda. There’s no god and if there is, he’s otherwise engaged and distant. All we need is our ingenuity and our technology. Progress will continue unabated. But it doesn’t. Human towers fall.

At the tower of Babel, God confused the tongues of humans. At Pentecost, creates understanding. The tongues of fire represent clarity. Pentecost reverses the damage of Babel. But look at the church today: More Babel than Pentecost. More strife, dissensions, factions, and envy than love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Oh, baby, the Holy Spirit has her work cut out for her.

Think of the church as agent of understanding. Steven Covey, raise your hand if you’ve had the five day Effective Habits training, says, “Seek first to understand and then to be understood.” Breaking down communication barriers is church work. I know it is hard to think of the bitterly divided churches in this way, but we are only one Pentecost from transformation. There is hope.

Pentecost is the power of the Holy Spirit brokering a new deal, and getting people talking to one another. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the spirit gave them ability.” The Holy Spirit negotiates a new contract for all peoples of the world. The Holy Spirit, the lead attorney in negotiating what this world needs most: PEACE. The Holy Spirit, our advocate, creates understanding for all our confusion.

We could use a new Pentecost. As we stumble along trying to figure out how to be the Church of Pentecost, we are more often hot air than fresh wind of the Spirit, more often a frazzled group than the flames of God’s glory. We could use a new Pentecost. May we pray for a new outpouring of the Spirit, a renewal of our hearts, that fire in the belly. May First Baptist Church be one place God visits and where the fresh winds blow and where the fire of God kindles in us a passion and power and presence that will pour out into the streets and renew lives and increase hope and multiply understanding.