

Sunday, May 23, 2021

Day of Pentecost, Year B

Prayer of the Day

Mighty God, you breathe life into our bones, and your Spirit brings truth to the world. Send us this Spirit, transform us by your truth, and give us language to proclaim your gospel, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Acts 2:1-21

Originally Pentecost was a Jewish thanksgiving-type festival celebrated seven weeks after Passover. On this particular Pentecost, however, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the entire community of believers just as Jesus had promised and the scriptures had prophesied. Empowered by the Spirit, the entire community bears witness to God's activity in multiple languages.

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, [the apostles] were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.

¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' ”

Psalm: Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth. (Ps. 104:30)

²⁴How manifold are your | works, O LORD!
In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full | of your creatures.
²⁵**Yonder is the sea, great and wide, with its swarms too man- | y to number,
living things both | small and great.**
²⁶There go the ships | to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you made for the | sport of it.
²⁷**All of them | look to you
to give them their food | in due season. R**
²⁸You give it to them; they | gather it;
you open your hand, and they are filled | with good things.
²⁹**When you hide your face, | they are terrified;
when you take away their breath, they die and return | to their dust.**
³⁰You send forth your Spirit, and they | are created;
and so you renew the face | of the earth.
³¹**May the glory of the LORD en- | dure forever;
O LORD, rejoice in | all your works. R**
³²You look at the earth | and it trembles;
you touch the mountains | and they smoke.
³³**I will sing to the LORD as long | as I live;
I will praise my God while I | have my being.**
³⁴May these words of | mine please God.
I will rejoice | in the LORD.
^{35b}**Bless the LORD, | O my soul.
Hal- | lelujah! R**

Second Reading: Romans 8:22-27

By pouring the Holy Spirit into our hearts, God gives us the promised first fruit of eternal life so that we await God's future in hope. In the meantime, the Spirit also intercedes for us by carrying the prayers of our weak human hearts to God.

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for

what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

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

While speaking to his disciples before his death, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as “the Helper” and describes the difference the Spirit will make in their lives and in the world.

[Jesus said,] ²⁶“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

^{16:4b}“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; ¹¹about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

Sermon

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Our weather is decidedly warmer. The sun shines brightly to our approval and enjoyment. Society, nationally and locally, is reopening – moving to what is likely to be a new normal. Summer is just around the corner with so much more to see and do than last year.

We are breathing a bit easier. The light at the end of the tunnel is shining brighter than ever. Yet caution and safety are the bywords for some time to come. We are beginning to make plans for the near and not so near future. Life, in general, is looking better than it has for roughly 15 months. We are smiling easier and with more confidence.

And to top all of that off – today – the Day of Pentecost – we gather to celebrate the greatest gift Christ gives to us – his Spirit – the very Spirit of God - the third person of the Trinitarian God we serve and celebrate.

In Ezekiel's day, the people through whom God would bless all creation's families had come to a standstill and sprawled lifeless, dispirited as bleached dried bones. We then see that the Spirit sets Ezekiel among the bones, gives life-giving power to his words, and behold, ligaments connect bones, muscles give rattling skeletons flesh and motion. The hope of new life is not only for God's people, but for all people of the earth.

In addition to the quotes from Peter in our first reading, there are many other scriptural illusions that add meaning and depth to Luke's account of the noisy Spirit – wind. Throughout the Old Testament we hear echoes of God dispersing the Spirit on the seventy elders in the wilderness in the Book of Numbers. We find Isaiah's promise that fire and wind would accompany God's latter day gathering of the nations.

It is not difficult to see the Spirit active in the bush that burned but was not consumed but bore a word and promise that would change everything in the Book of Exodus.

We may also look back to the story we know as the Tower of Babel – the story of God scattering the earth's people into disparate tribes whose languages leave them mutually incomprehensible. But we learn that this situation does not lead to wholesale fragmentation and alienation. Rather, it leads to a new unity. In any and every language, the Spirit of God's word incarnate breathes new life, meaning, and purpose into human families.

Once, not unlike the disciples, we could not hear the Word in our bodies or minds. But now, however, since Jesus has come among us after his resurrection, breathed on us his Spirit, and surely kept the promise to send the Spirit, the Advocate, we know the truth and have the language and courage to speak the unifying gospel of mercy and forgiveness.

Except, except sometimes we don't. Sometimes our words fail us. And thankfully God hears, and God understands. And that too is God's language. It binds us together, it holds and encourages us, and shares the power of our Pentecost proclamation.

So, in a very real sense today can be viewed and appreciated as the final day of Easter – a resurrection day revolving around the mystery of the One who was crucified. But Pentecost is also something of an exclamation point on the fifty-day celebration that is Easter.

As we focus on our gospel text from John, I believe we need to keep the whole of John's gospel in mind. In a sense as John begins his gospel – "in the beginning was the Word" to the beach-side breakfast following the resurrection to the love of Christ coming to expression in the rending and feeding of his flock. We need to remember that right there in the midst of it all, Jesus declares that when lifted up, he will draw all people to

himself. And this is exactly what Luke and Ezekiel, and Paul and others are all getting at – the drawing together, the creating of something new, a unity by the power of the Spirit.

We find that when Jesus' closest followers perceive him to be on the verge of abandoning them, Jesus promises to send the Spirit. So often people claim to know what the Spirit is up to in details that are not so knowable. For instance, when something happens that reinforces one's own convictions, there is a tendency to attribute that the "work of the Spirit." This then suggests that when things go a less desirable way, the Spirit is either not interested or is somehow very distant and silent. And this is not what is so beautifully laid out before us today in our Pentecost texts.

Whenever one undertakes an in-depth study of the Spirit the word "mystery" comes into play almost immediately. That is to say, of course, that for all we know about the Spirit, there is so much more to grasp, so much more that we do not yet fully understand and comprehend.

Yet there is so much for us to see and trust what is certain about the Advocate, the Counselor, the Comforter. One thing that is certain is that you and I are consistently and persistently guided into the truth by the Spirit's continuing presence – that is, God's own saving presence.

The good news, the always great news is that by the power of the Spirit, God is with us now and will be with us always, no matter the circumstance. John's telling of the gospel story declares that the Spirit of God in our midst is Jesus – wrongly perceived as having abandoned us – is ever present.

And in a real sense, this is truly the fulfillment of Easter, the exclamation point that Pentecost places on the celebration of the pascal mystery, helping you and me in our weakness, pushing us to remember that we are, all of us, part of a still unfolding story of an unambiguous and saving love for the whole creation.

Someone once said, "we are in the Holy Spirit's birthing room." God is breathing new life into creation. Whether the breathing is labored or relaxed, it is the very breath of God in us, ever so deliberately making us one people.

And as one people, filled with the very Spirit of God, we have been given God's truth and are able to respond to the Spirit's urging and shake whatever dry bones that are within and become fully alive in the Spirit of God. Part of which is a mystery to us and always will be.

As we live and breath and use our flesh covered bones to proclaim the good news, we are constantly assured that the God who created us, who gave his life for us, sustains us and gives us the promise of salvation. What a truly awesome God we serve.

Early in Epiphany we celebrated the baptism of Christ and our baptism. And so today, Pentecost, it is appropriate that we give thanks for our life when we received the

precious life-giving gift of God's Spirit. We are truly a blessed people, serving a loving, caring, merciful God.

One image often spoken of on the Day of Pentecost is that today can be viewed as the birthday of the church. This is a reflection from our first reading from Acts. With the outpouring of the Spirit and the Old Testament reference to Joel's words it is appropriate to understand that the disciples then set out with renewed fervor to preach the good news and establish communities of believers that we today refer to as the earliest churches.

I'd like to end today close to where I began. Coming out of the pandemic, seeing more normalcy as the weeks and months move by, we are heartened, and we look with joy to a future that allows us to move about more and more as we did over a year ago. We go on living with the promise of a brighter future. We trust a return to normal or a new and acceptable normal. Our overall outlook is brighter.

And just so, our outlook is always brighter as we grasp onto, enjoy, and celebrate God's presence with us through the Spirit. We are thankful for the Spirit's guiding us as we continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus resurrected.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Alive in the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we bring our prayers before God who promises to hear us and answer in steadfast love.

A brief silence.

Gracious God, you give the Holy Spirit to your church, filling it with many and varied gifts. In the church throughout the world, strengthen us in our visioning and dreaming, that it may discover anew the Spirit's creative work. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of life, your mighty works are too numerous to count. The earth is full of your creatures, living things both great and small. Open your hand and give them the necessities of this life. Send your fresh Spirit over the face of the earth. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of the nations, at the sound of the rushing wind, people speaking different languages proclaimed and heard together your deeds of power. Fill the leaders of nations with your Holy Spirit, so that they exercise your gracious will in the lives of people. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of faithfulness, you tend to the needs of your people, even the sighs of our hearts. Hear those who cry out to you in distress. Restore to wholeness all who are in any need this day (*especially*). Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of love, fill this congregation (*name*) with gratitude for the gifts we have received from you. Renew our ministries, heal our divisions, and open us to the needs of our neighbors. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

God of hope, those who have died in you raise their eternal song of praise. We give you thanks for the many gifts of your people and rejoice in the witness of your saints (*especially*). Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

In the hope of new life in Christ, we raise our prayers to you, trusting in your never-ending goodness and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.