

The Feast Day of Pentecost

May 20, 2018

Ezekiel 37:1-14/ Acts 2:1-21/ John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

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“O God, the Holy Spirit, come to us, and among us; come as the wind, and cleanse us; come as the fire, and burn; come as the dew and refresh; convict, convert and consecrate our hearts for our good, for the sake of the world, and for your greater glory. Amen.”

The “buzz amongst many Episcopalians this past week was the anticipation of presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s sermon for the wedding of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry yesterday (Saturday). Bingo cards with phrases that are recurring favorites of Bishop Curry’s were available for anyone interested in playing along while he preached. Many were wondering how many of those phrases he would use in this sermon that would be seen and heard round the world. “The Jesus movement”. “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.” “The power of God’s dream for the world can overcome the nightmare we are living”. Would Bishop Curry come out of the pulpit when he preached? How long would he preach? This was for royalty after all. I understand that Meghan and Prince Harry had never met Bishop Curry. They apparently asked him to preach. I’m not sure they had any idea his message would be quite so unconventional and stirring, especially for such a staid, momentous, and formal English event.

If you did not have the opportunity to see and hear Bishop Curry’s sermon, it’s worth listening to and watching. It was thirteen minutes long. He based the sermon on the text from the Hebrew Scriptures in Song of Solomon, chapter 8:6-7: *“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”* I don’t think it was probably any great surprise that his theme was the power of LOVE. Not just romantic love, like love between spouses. The Bishop launched into the power of love to change lives, to change the world. To transform, heal, and unite. He seized the opportunity to preach the gospel with gusto. An African American man serving as presiding bishop, preaching to the royalty of England and the rest of the world. Deidre Good, a retired New Testament professor from General Seminary commented simply on FaceBook: “Right time, right place, right person, right message.”

Jokingly (I think?), several Trinity members suggested to me, after seeing and hearing Bishop Curry’s sermon that I really needed to step up my game today! So, here goes!

So – the Feast of Pentecost – what’s it all about anyway? In a nutshell – Love, breath, and fire. The power of love, whose source is God, is fueled by breath and fire. Pentecost points directly to God’s love and power revealed in the person of the crucified and risen Jesus, the Christ. Pentecost was not an ending, but the beginning of a new chapter of God’s love let loose to change the world.

Created life – humans and animals, begins life with breath. Breath brings life into being. It animates and sustains. The second creation account in Genesis says God breathed into man

the breath of life, and humans became living beings. Everyone holds their breath for a few seconds the moment after a mother delivers her baby, waiting for the newborn to take his first breath, to utter her first cry.

The Hebrew word “*ruach*” can mean wind, breath, or spirit. The Pentecost story in Acts 2 says that when they were all gathered together in one place, the Spirit blew in with a loud “whoosh” like a violent wind, filling the entire house. The wind was followed immediately by divided tongues like fire resting on each of them, and they began to speak in other languages.

Fire ignites. It lights up the darkness to reveal things hidden. And to light the way. It can devastate and destroy life, as well as clear away, purify, and make room for new growth. Fire has power and is not something to be toyed with carelessly.

Pentecost is the continuation of the great love story of God and creation. Act I in the love story begins with God’s act of creation, and later, deliverance and freedom, then exile and homecoming for God’s people, the people of Israel. Act II, centers on Jesus, a Jew descended from those early Hebrew people. He enters the story to reveal God directly, to redeem humanity, and to set in motion the rebirth of all creation. Pentecost is the culmination of Act II. But Pentecost and the beginning of the church is not the end of the story. In Act III, the story goes on. The new thing begun at Pentecost continues with re-creation, reconciliation, and restoration. The finale is yet to come when all of creation will be made completely whole and righteous, that is living in “right relationship” with God, humanity, and the entire created world. Like that vision of the prophet Isaiah (11:6) of the peaceable kingdom, where “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” Such a beautiful image.

In the meantime. . .we need that Advocate Jesus promised, the Spirit of truth who comes alongside to guide us. I need an Advocate, and I think we all do. One who will both comfort and challenge us. One who reveals truth and empowers us to carry it out and live it. The Spirit, the Advocate has come and lives in us. And yet . . .

Yet we find ourselves often looking over the valley lying before us, a massive field strewn with bones. Very dry bones, dry as only old bones can be. Weathered by sun and rain. Parched white, calcified, brittle, cracked. Relics of life long past.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” says the Lord. “O Lord God, you know”, hedges Ezekiel. Meanwhile the people of the house of Israel are lamenting:

“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost”.

Jerusalem had been sacked by the Babylonians. The temple was destroyed and all the elites of Israel carried off into exile in Babylon. They had lost their promised land, their livelihood, national identity, and most of all, their faith. Their God had promised them life in the land as the fulfillment of Exodus salvation. In exile, they now found themselves a wilderness people. Unlike the first generation in the wilderness, the exiles are not on the move to a promised land, but just the reverse. They have been forced away from the land. They grieve for a world that

they cannot go back to. And it takes them years to admit to this change, for the reality of their new world to sink in.

Accepting the current reality is just as hard today for us as it was for the people of Israel carried off to Babylon. Some days we are right there with the people of Israel, our bones drying up and our hope lost. "Only God knows what is next for us."

And God says, "Prophesy over these bones: 'Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!'"

And God, the Master, told the dry bones, "Watch this: I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am God!" (*The Message*).

That same powerful, life-giving Word of the Lord became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Through him, God re-created, renewed, and redeemed the human race. Through that Word, humanity has been made into a new kingdom of priests, a holy nation. The human race has been redeemed, just when things looked about as promising as a parched valley full of very old, dry bones.

If dry bones can live, so God's people in every age, can be re-created by God's Spirit. This is the Spirit who comes and empowers the church at Pentecost.

Today the Holy Spirit goes out ahead of us, stirring things up to re-create the Church with a new and unfamiliar look. Re-creating the Church as it needs to be for our time. With a new urgency. New priorities. New places to serve that we haven't noticed before. New ways to share the good news. New ways to live together and be connected as Christ's body in the world.

The Spirit is still breathing over the chaos and confusion around us, in us. Blowing over us the wind of holy, hot breath to invigorate, in-spire, and infuse the anemic and atrophied baptismal imaginations we have forgotten and left behind. Every time we baptize, confirm, ordain, and celebrate Holy Eucharist, we call on the Holy Spirit to come and be poured out, to fill us with Christ's presence, power, and holy love

So I would like to propose a "season of Pentecost growth" challenge for all of us.

What if today, we claimed this as the first day of our re-creation? The unveiling of a new and improved Trinity in the making. What if we invited the Spirit to help us live into our name as **Trinity** Episcopal Church. What if we vowed to each other and to God to make everything we say and do be about these three elements – holy love, fire, and breath. So that, in any activity, any meeting, any conversation and decision-making that does not contain some part of each of those three elements, we won't spend time or energy engaging with it. This would include those love-stoppers like gossip, despair, holding grudges, blame, negativity and nay saying, apathy, and fear in any form – fear of loss of power and position, fear of change, fear that who we once were will be forgotten. Let's be honest with each other. We need to reclaim this "trinity" of love, that is, the presence of God who changes and liberates us, and comes alongside us, sticks by us. We need the Spirit's hot and holy breath to come over us again and bring new life, new

resolve to live as the people God created us to be. We need the fire, the passion and intensity to live into God's truth and live out both accountability and forgiveness with each other.

We're human and all imperfect. So we at times squander the love, breath, and fire of God among us. We let sin continue to flourish like weeds among us unchecked, weeds which no amount of *Roundup* is going to stop. We need the Spirit's advocacy, the Spirit's guidance, the Spirit's power so that we can move away from those times we are self-absorbed and selfish, move toward being committed to building up this body of Christ of which we are all a part. We need to move away from exclusivity and become more radically inclusive, which means no one gets "shushed", shut out, shut down, or shamed in conversation, even when we disagree strongly with each other. The Spirit is calling us to move away from spiritually stunted and stagnant living, to become seekers, disciples hungry for nourishment and connections built through serving others.

We will in September be three years serving together in this place. I am praying about a vision for us. I think I'm beginning to get a sense of what I think is part of God's vision for this Trinity Church. It is to become the embodied holy trinity of God's love, breath, and fire in this community. Because love, breath, and fire attract. They bind together, unite, cleanse, purify, heal, restore and give life. Love, breath, and fire change the world.

I think God wants to make us *wholly and Holy*, Trinity Church. On May 6th when Peggy and Dave Phister were here for us to thank and bid her farewell, she said to me later, "Dave and I both really felt the Spirit's presence there in worship".

Hallelujah and Amen! – members of "Holy" Trinity! May the Spirit bring to completion that which has already begun. "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever." Amen.