

Creating anew
Cynthia Lapp
Pentecost – May 27, 2007

Acts 2:1-21
John 14:12-17, 25-27

Pentecost. Think red. Fire. Wind. The birth of the church. Pentecost is one of the high points in the Christian liturgical calendar. It is the only one that has not yet been taken over by commercialism. I shouldn't even say it. Next year there will probably be Hallmark cards with clever turns of phrase like "as you seek your way, the answer's blowing in the wind" or "wishing you firepower in this Pentecost season."

We often look at the Pentecost story and wonder at the strangeness of it all, at least I do. Why were the disciples gathered in that room anyway? What were they hoping for? And flames on their heads? They were gathered for a Jewish festival which happened 50 days after the Passover. Seven Sabbaths (and the weeks between) plus one day made 50 days. A mini jubilee. Today this festival is called Shavu'ot and it is a celebration of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. (While the Jewish Shavu'ot celebration was 50 days after Passover, the Christian Pentecost is a celebration 50 days after Easter.)

In Acts 1 we read that before Jesus ascended to heaven he instructed the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for God's promise: they would receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, "not many days from now."

As followers of the Rabbi Jesus the disciples assemble to celebrate this Jewish festival. The disciples gather, marking the holy day not knowing that something remarkable is about to happen.

It seems to be this event in Jerusalem that has a coalescing effect on the disciples and other followers. Forty to fifty years after the fact (when Acts was written) it would have been relatively easy to look back and say "that's when it happened." 2000 years later we call it the "birth of the church." Looking back we can say it was like God created anew.

How does God create? With breath, with wind. There is light, the first day and it is good. The way God worked in the creation of the world is also the way God works in the creation of this new way of understanding God in Jesus. The Pentecost story is a new creation story, (the creation of the church.)

The disciples are gathered all together, waiting for something, they are not sure what. It is almost as if there is a void, nothingness. Jesus is gone again, leaving a huge empty space. And suddenly there is a loud sound, the wind, the breath of God blowing upon the face of the earth, blowing in that room. And then there is light, as on the first day when God created light. There is a fire, a flame, on each one's head, almost as if each of them is a candle, a light themselves. They see the light of Christ in each other.

Then they begin speaking in different languages, just as in another familiar story in Genesis. In that story, the people gathered to build a tower to reach God. They imagined that if

they could reach heaven they could somehow preserve their singular language and culture. God is offended by this attempt to imitate God. They are not sincerely searching; they are trying to take over God's work. I suppose God could have violently punished the people or could have knocked down the tower. But instead God confuses their speech so that they can no longer understand each other or work together. And the people scatter over the whole earth.

In this new creation story in Acts the people are waiting on God, not reaching for God but earnestly seeking. They are filled with the Spirit and as they speak it seems they are speaking all the languages of the world. It is not just for those gathered in the room but as they go out into the streets it seems that all who hear them are given a gift of understanding. Indeed the writer says "there were devout Jews from all over the world" gathered for the festival. And they are mystified how these few who all appear to be from Galilee could be speaking these other languages so fluently, and be understood. In this reversal of the ancient story God does not confuse but enlightens. God is starting over, creating anew.

While we often think that the miracle was that the disciples were speaking in other languages, there is a second miracle; the many languages were understood. It was not only the mouths that were opened in a new way; it was the ears as well. As people heard the praise they were amazed but also disturbed. This was not ordinary behavior. (And it is not just first century Jews and Mennonite intellectuals who are disturbed by "speaking in tongues." According to the religion page in the Washington Post the Southern Baptist Convention discourages its missionaries from using what it calls "private prayer language.") So while God was trying to reverse the separation of the peoples there is some resistance to understanding that action.

In an effort to make clear that this strange behavior is not common drunkenness Peter stands with the eleven other disciples by his side, as his witnesses, and declares that "this is the fulfillment of the prophets." This is the pouring out of God's Spirit; the same Spirit of whom Joel spoke and Jesus preached. While we call this the beginning of the church it was for those gathered more of a crystallization of following the Jesus way, of understanding their experience in a new way. Eventually they became the church, the Christian church, as in followers of Jesus rather than Moses.

Now, almost 2000 years later, we wonder again what it means to follow this Jesus. What does it mean for us as Christians to live in this world that is so diverse, that we hardly understand the language of the person who lives right next door. Even within the church, across denominations, in the Allegheny Conference, sometimes in this congregation, we don't understand each other.

How can we open our ears to the power of the spirit and hear in a new way? How do we listen to those who seem like they are speaking our language without seeming suspicious?

The story does not stop at a new creation. The writer of Luke-Acts connects not only the Torah to this event but also the prophets:

I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind,
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young people will see visions,

and your elders will dream dreams.
Even upon the most insignificant of my people,
both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they shall prophesy.

The words from Joel are not a real comfort for those of us who think we understand it all, who think that we are the anointed ones. The prophet seems to say, “think again.” It is not only you chosen few who receive God’s spirit but even the most unlikely; slaves, girls, young people. Just like God’s law was given on Mt. Sinai to those who would receive it, God’s Spirit is poured out on all who call on God’s name.

And while I have been trying to make a case that Pentecost is a new beginning the end of this quote from Joel sounds more like we are near the end.

“The sun shall be turned to darkness,
the moon will become blood.”

For the Jews, for those in the early church, there was a sense of the end. They hung on by hoping and looking toward the future when the world would be changed, when they would be rescued from the Romans, when Jesus would return.

We are in a time when we sometimes wonder if the sun will go dark and the moon turn to blood. How long can we survive with this destruction of the planet? How long can we live with the hate and misunderstanding that leads to violence in families, in neighborhoods, between peoples, between countries. Where is that peace that Jesus speaks so elusively of in John, peace “not as the world gives.”

Peter goes on to preach quite a long sermon, one we hardly ever read or hear. Even though it sounds like it is the end, it is not. Peter makes a case by quoting from the Psalms (Psalm 16), that Jesus is the Messiah. If they want to “save themselves from this corrupt generation” as he puts it, the way to do that is to follow the Jesus way.

The passage we heard from John 14 gives more specific instruction on what that way is. If we make that choice, to be saved from the corrupt generation, if we choose to love Jesus then we will keep the commandments. And the Spirit of truth will be ours since we love Jesus. In some ways it seems a circular reasoning, perhaps that’s why we call it faith and not certainty.

It is not an easy choice, to throw our lot in with those who have a history of persecution, imprisonment, death. It is certainly not logical, yet if look at the life of Jesus, at the early understandings of these first followers, we do see a path toward new life. Those who became followers on that Shavu’ot day began a new life, sharing possessions, sharing with those in need, praying, and eating together with glad and generous hearts. And they had the goodwill of all the people.

This could be a description of our sister church in Sincelejo, Colombia: finding joy in generosity, sharing with those who are in need, using meager resources creatively. If we truly want to save ourselves from this corrupt generation, and a case could be made that our

generation is just as corrupt as the generations in which Jesus and the gospel writers lived, then we must pay attention to those who are following the Jesus way today. We need to listen to our sisters and brothers in Sincelejo. For some of us that means listening to a language we do not know. But as we see in Acts, sometimes language is not a barrier; hearts and ears can be opened to unite us across culture, economics, different religious practices.

May our ears and hearts be open as on that first Pentecost day and may we seek the spirit of truth that Jesus promised.