

May 31st, 2020

Acts 2:1-21 “They Were Gathered Where?”

Some churches get “short-changed” when it comes to Pentecost. We get so focused on Christmas and Easter that Pentecost ends up being the holy day that gets overlooked. Not for us, though! First Christian Church in Chico makes a pretty big deal out of Pentecost. We love it! If we were living in a Non-COVID 19 world right now, we’d be over at Wildwood Park singing songs, celebrating communion and hearing testimonies while enjoying the smell of burgers and hot dogs being cooked on the grill. Honestly, it’s my favorite service of the year just because I love being outside and food makes everything better. But here we are, scattered yet together on Zoom and FaceBook Live. Some of us are wearing red still. We’ve at least got that today. But it’s different. I don’t smell burgers. I don’t hear kids playing on the playground. I don’t hear the dogs barking. And I miss it.

Maybe one of the reasons why I appreciate Pentecost so much is that it hasn’t been co-opted by the Kingdoms of the Earth. There’s no Pentecost Oreo cookies with red filling. There’s no “flaming tongue” flavored Doritos. There’s no “rushing wind” air fresheners or anything like that. There’s no marketing attached to this observance like Christmas or Easter or St. Patrick’s Day or All Hallows Eve. Sure we wear red. Sure we’ve had “Happy Birthday Church” cakes in the past. But there’s a peculiarity around Pentecost that the Western Church doesn’t always get. Like I said a few weeks ago ... we don’t always have a good handle on matters relating to the Holy Spirit.

Here’s something that’s important for us to know. Pentecost isn’t really “ours.” Pentecost is a *Jewish* holy day before we Christians got hold of it. Remembering that Pentecost already existed helps us understand why our passage starts out with, “When the Day of Pentecost had arrived.” Pentecost was and is observed 50 days after the Passover. Pentecost celebrated Moses receiving the Law on Mt. Sinai where God’s people wandered after being freed from slavery in Egypt. And everyone was

included in this celebration, “You, your sons, your daughters, the Levites living among you.” This was an all-inclusive Jewish holy day. This is the celebration that God is blessing *all of creation* through the Israelite Nation.

So let’s take a look at what’s going on here on this particular day of Pentecost in the mid-30s AD in Jerusalem. This story comes from the Book of Acts. And Acts was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. In Luke’s gospel, the last thing Jesus did before he ascended into heaven was to tell his disciples, “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; *so stay here in the city* until you have been clothed with power from on high.” And then the Book of Acts starts out with a little re-cap of Jesus’ ascension into heaven. In Acts, Jesus’ last words to the disciples was, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” This may be a little confusing because we’ve been studying John’s gospel for the last couple of months. In John, we learned about how after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples were holed up in a house out of fear of what the authorities would do to them. That’s when Jesus appeared to them, gave them the Holy Spirit and said, “Okay, get out of this house and get to work!”

In Luke, however, the disciples actually got to be outside to see Jesus ascend into heaven, but before he left, Jesus told them, “Go hole yourself up in the city until you receive the Holy Spirit.” That’s quite a bit different than John’s gospel. Does that bother you? Are you asking, “But which one is true?” If so, then yay! You are engaging in responsible Biblical scholarship. Good for you! The answer to the question, “Which one is true?” is, of course, “both.” The key to understanding and engaging the Bible is to not get bogged down by details in the differences. You pay attention to the similarities. So in Acts, the disciples were holed up in the upper room of a house because Jesus instructed them to do so! But on that Day of Pentecost when there were a *lot* of Jews in the City to celebrate the gift of the Law, the

disciples got a big surprise. A rushing wind filled the place where they were gathered and sort of blew them out of the room and into this crowd. Who was in the crowd? Jews from every nation! In John's gospel, *Jesus* was the one who came into the house gave the disciples the Holy Spirit and told them to go out and get to work! In Luke and Acts, Jesus tells them to go inside the house and wait, and then it's the Holy Spirit that blows them out of the room and empowers them to go into the world and get to work! No matter what gospel you read, the Holy Spirit is going to kick you out of your comfort zone and out into the world.

How does this relate to our times and our circumstances? How about this: There are so many Christians out there who miss gathering in their buildings for worship. How much do they miss it? So much that they are willing to take big risks to return to "the way things were." So why, then, on the Day of Pentecost ... on the day where the Holy Spirit literally blew the disciples out of the room and into the world ... why do so many churches want to bottle up the Holy Spirit and bring it back into their buildings? What's that old gospel song, "Holy Spirit, Thou Art Welcome in This Place?" Great! I'm glad that we can welcome the Holy Spirit into our places of worship. Most of the time we're scared of the Holy Spirit or we're not sure what to do with the Holy Spirit. So good on us for wanting to sing, "Holy Spirit Thou Art Welcome in This Place!" But what does the Holy Spirit do? What is the purpose of the Holy Spirit? To get us out of our buildings and out into the world to do something new and different. To remind us that the church isn't the building, but rather the people! That is the Pentecost connection.

Danielle Shroyer, writer of *The Hardest Question* wrote, "*Without Pentecost, we'd just be people who told Jesus' story. With Pentecost, we are people who live into Jesus' story.*" Pentecost, for those early Christians, was an invitation into a *new* life. It's an invitation to leave the comfort of the upper room, and get out into the world. "Okay, well that's easy for you to say, Jesse. But it's kind of hard to get out into the world today when we're told that the best thing to do is stay home." For sure. I understand. We are 11 weeks into Butte County's Shelter-In-

Place ordinance. Think about that for a moment. This is the 11th Sunday that we've met here in cyberspace for worship. For some, the novelty is over, and folks are starting to ask, "Okay, how do we live into this for the foreseeable future?" What does it mean to live into this new reality of what the church is going to be? Because there's no going back to whatever was normal. There's only the invitation to *live into this new part of where God is calling us*. And as it is with God, this is an invitation. We can choose to take it or leave it. God always gives us choice. Even in this crazy crisis when everything is upside down, this is still God's gentle invitation. Our part of the equation is to figure out how we're going to respond.

Here's something to think about though – "How do we get back to normal" is *not* the question we need to be asking. "Getting back to normal" is not a faithful response. Being invited into something new is. We are being pushed into the "marketplace" ... being pushed into new places and new understandings and even new languages. How many of us have learned new languages? And I'm not talking about learning Spanish or French in your spare time. We're learning a new language related to our current situation. Think about it - words and phrases like, "Zoom," "Shelter in Place," "Conference Call," "Live Streaming," "Social Distancing," and "Self-isolation" have become a part of our vocabulary. I learned one the other day that I can relate to: "Blursday." Blursday is not knowing what day of the week it is because our normal routines have been interrupted. A couple of weeks ago, there was an annual convention for preachers called The Festival of Homiletics. For the first time in the history of that festival, it had to be live streamed in order to even have it. It could have been canceled, but the planners decided to take a risk and use technology that they barely had a handle on to make the festival happen. One of the speakers, Lenny Duncan, said, "All it took to get the church to find the creativity it desperately needed for so long, was for all the pastors to be forced out of their buildings." Ouch. But ... yeah. Again, what does the Holy Spirit do? Blows us out of our "upper rooms" and into the world.

Or as Eric Fistler, host of the Pulpit Fiction podcast put it, “Is the current church as flexible as the ancient church at adapting to the Spirit’s calling? Or will we insist on the Spirit working within our own institutional or traditional methods? Do we allow the Spirit to guide us or will we keep the Spirit in the back seat? Are we willing to be led by the Spirit without knowing our destination?” In other words, are we willing and able to adapt and be flexible or will we put all of our time and energy trying to “get back to the way things were?” Do we hide in the upper room and hope that Jesus comes back and makes everything better? Or are we willing to allow the Spirit to lead us out into new opportunities for ministry?

We are being pushed into something very different. We are being pushed into places where we have to work with and cooperate with other faith communities ... and not just Christian faith communities. Communities that were, not that long ago not even talking to one another, are now collaborating together and sharing information and resources. Just like the people gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. All these people who had difficulty communicating with each other, had tongues of fire placed upon them to bring them together. And here’s a little trivia for you, a lot of people say that the gift of the tongues of fire enabled everyone to speak different languages. No. The tongues of fire enabled the people to *understand each other* in their own language. It wasn’t a gift of speaking, it was a gift of *listening*.

And that’s where we are on the Day of Pentecost in the year 2020. We are in a position where we have to listen. May we as a community of faith listen to the Spirit’s invitation to discover the new opportunities for ministry that are ahead of us.