

## **Pentecost 2016**

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Everybody loves the part of the Pentecost story where the flames come down and people are happily proclaiming the Good News in all those languages. What many do not think about or block out is the later half of this story. That would be the part that is from the book of Joel that sounds so much like Daniel or Revelation. The, visions, dreams, blood, smoke all that good end of the world stuff. In fact this is actually a very dramatic passage!

They disciples have seen Jesus, they have watched him ascend into heaven but they really have no idea what is coming next. They have a promise from Jesus, but nothing has happened yet. Rome is still this huge and to them evil power. By the time this passage is written in the late 90s CE, Jerusalem no longer exists. It has been destroyed by Rome during the revolt. The temple is gone and the world may very well seem to be about to end. So the mindset of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church is one of great peril mixed with great faith.

All the disciples even the newest disciple Mathias are gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. As Wendy and I both researched the origins of Pentecost I was surprised how many things it signified. It is the festival of the first fruits of the spring harvest festival marking the harvest of wheat around 50 days after Passover. This would be a joyous celebration of the new harvest. However it is also the celebration of the giving of the law to Moses and the people of Israel. This story is also filled with images of smoke and flame and terror if you read Exodus.

I was meditating on this passage and wondered how disturbing what they saw might have been. I believe that we have sanitized this image in art and in the various icons of the event. Stop and think for a moment, in fact close your eyes and imagine what it might have been like in the words of the passage.

They are all gathered for the festival of Pentecost. Into this quiet scene, God breaks in. Suddenly things change dramatically. From heaven what sounds like a violent wind comes rushing into the room. Can you hear it? Can you feel it? All is confusion. Look at the disciples what do you see. "Divided tongues as of fire appear among them and a tongue rests on each." What does that look like. What is the light like? What do the "flames" look like?

All of a sudden you hear the disciples speaking but they are not speaking Aramaic or Greek, they are speaking many languages. What does this sound like? Is the wind still blowing? Are the flames still there?

Everyone is wondering what is going on. Some claim the disciples are drunk. What are they saying to you?

All of sudden you hear Peter speak up and he is quoting the prophet Joel and speaking of the end times. The last thing he says is that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. What does he mean they will be saved?

So come back to our quiet little church here in Virginia Beach. What an amazing experience that must have been. I had never thought about it being that chaotic. What does all this mean? What does it mean to be saved?

People toss that phrase off all the time. Whether talking about end times or just in general we've all had that person get in our face and say, "Have you been saved?" Now I usually have the urge to run the other direction as fast as possible because you know a lecture is probably coming.

As it happens Richard Rohr has taken on that topic in some of his writings this week. For so many it is just simply making sure that all the right rules have been followed and all those things you are supposed to do like baptism have all been checked off so you get to go to heaven for we know the alternative. Or at least many people think they know the alternative of a God that seems to delight in punishing people forever if they don't "love" God and in particular Jesus Christ. Now that is an entirely different sermon.

The operative piece in this whole story is not the wind, nor the flame, but that the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit. They are in communion with God through that gift of the Spirit. Being saved is so much more than following rules. It is about being in a relationship with God and we don't have to wait for heaven to get there. John's gospel last week was all about what Richard Rohr calls unitive consciousness. All major world religions at their higher levels seek the unitive experience. Mystics whether Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, you name it all seek this. This is what being saved is about. This is what the Kingdom of God is all about and no you don't have to wait for the new Jerusalem to descend out of the heavens to experience it.

On Pentecost there was a great in breaking of the holy into our world. When God breaks into our world it is rarely a tame experience. This truly changed things forever. It was from this moment that this infant church starting to spread to the ends of the earth. And they did in languages and in ways that everyone could understand.

One of my storytelling friends gave me a Litany for Pentecost that touches on many of these themes. I would like to close my sermon with that litany read by three of us on the altar. You can find the litany as an insert in your bulletin.

## PENTECOST

**ALL**                    **They were gathered Lord, Those Early Believers,**

**Speaker 1**            Hoping one Hope,

**Speaker 2**            Dreaming one Dream,

**Speaker 3**            Praying one Prayer.

**Speaker 1**            Despite their squabbles and jealousies, they looked back to the good old days, when the Spirit descended like a dove and the thunder spoke, as Jesus and the coming of your kingdom were baptized in the Jordan.

**ALL**                    **They were gathered Lord, those early believers,**

**Speaker 1**            Hoping one hope,

**Speaker 2**            Dreaming one dream,

**Speaker 3**            Praying one prayer.

**Speaker 2**            And looking forward to a kingdom that has no end, where justice and mercy flowed like an ever flowing stream, that promises the things hoped for, the certainty of things not seen.

**ALL**                    **They were gathered Lord, those early believers,**

**Speaker 1**            Hoping one hope,

**Speaker 2**            Dreaming one dream,

**Speaker 3**            Praying one Prayer.

**Speaker 3**            Fearing what might happen now that Jesus had ascended, they gazed up into the sky and wondered about His Promise. They trusted and obeyed Jesus by waiting... anxiously but prayerfully.

**ALL**                    **They were gathered Lord, those early believers,**

**Speaker 1**            Hoping one hope,

**Speaker 2**            Dreaming one dream,

**Speaker 3** Praying one Prayer.

**Speaker 3** But, the moment was frightening Lord...  
 For the rushing filled the room with a mighty sound,  
 And vision was realized that all things were passed away,  
 And behold! All things were made new.  
 That's frightening, Lord, to have all that is you  
 transformed. That's new Lord and newness is frightening.

**All** **They were gathered Lord, those early believers,**

**Speaker 1** Hoping one hope,

**Speaker 2** Dreaming one dream,

**Speaker 3** Praying one prayer.

**Speaker 1** And they were frightened, but the moment was  
 promised, Lord, just as was the gathering and the dove  
 and the wind and the power which fell like tongues of  
 flame and burnt away the chaff of fear and tempered the  
 Spirit of boldness which spoke with the power of God  
 so that all knew and understood..  
 It was power, Lord, for those early believers, that remade  
 lives and energized spirits. It was power that was  
 promised and delivered.

**All** **We are gathered Lord, we modern believers,**

**Speaker 2** And despite our bickering and Biting and fighting,  
 we too are

**Speaker 1** Hoping one hope,

**Speaker 2** Dreaming one dream,

**Speaker 3** Praying one prayer.

**Speaker 2** And we are frightened. For the blowing of the wind tells  
 us that all things must always be made new..  
 That life lived must change and become what you would  
 have it to be.

**Speaker 3** And that is frightening Lord. But we too have the  
 promise. We look back to the dove and the wind and the  
 fire and sometimes, sometimes, Lord it baptizes us,

and our lives are made new and powerful and God's will is Done!

**All**                    **The Power of Pentecost, Lord**

**Speaker 2**            You know because you promised.....

**All**                    **It comes to those who are gathered,**

**Speaker 1**            Who Hope one hope,

**Speaker 2**            Who Dream one dream,

**Speaker 3**            Who Pray one prayer.

**All**                    **And..... We are frightened.**

**Speaker 1**            Thank you Holy Spirit.

**Speaker 2**            Thank you, Jesus Christ.

**Speaker 3**            Thank you, Father, for Pentecost and power.

**ALL**                    **AMEN.**

***By: Rev. Charles Morrison***