

Pentecost, 2007 (Year C)
St. John's Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain, MA
Jeffrey Mello

Acts 2:1-11
Ps. 104: 25-37
1 Corinthians 12:4-13
John 20:19-23

Passionate Spirit, open our ears to hear your word, open our minds to understand your truth, open our hearts and set them on fire. AMEN.

What is your heart's desire? What do you want from God? What do you want from the Church?

These are questions that were posed to me recently while on retreat in preparation for ordination. They are good questions, I think, important questions. And so I ask you:

What is your heart's desire? What do you want from God? What do you want from the Church?

Today, as you know, is Pentecost. It is the feast on which we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church. It is a celebration that marks the transition from time spent in the church year learning about Jesus' birth, life, ministry, passion, resurrection and ascension that we began in Advent to a season referred to as "Ordinary Time" – a season in which we think and learn about what it means to live into the reality of being a Christian in the world. We might think of this first half we just completed as the "what" of the liturgical year, and now we begin the "how" portion of our programming.

At the crux between these two, is the festival of Pentecost. The passionate encounter of the Spirit with the people gives way to a time of long, steady spiritual growth. We understand this visually in the Church as today we celebrate with the wonderful red altar frontal and hangings. Soon, it will be the season of Green. Encountering the Spirit begins a new time of growth in our relationship with God. Today is "Miracle Grow" Sunday for you gardeners in the congregation.

According to the author of Acts, today is a day about fire – the red-hot passion of the Holy Spirit descending in tongues of fire and landing on the heads of those gathered. The Pentecost story in Acts is truly a Pentecost event, taking place 50 days after the Resurrection, mirroring the Jewish festival of Pentecost that marked the fifty days from Passover.

In Acts, the author tells us, the Holy Spirit arrives with a "sound like the rush of a violent wind". I imagine them sitting all together in a house as the walls and windows begin to vibrate, then to shake. The closed shutters lift off their hinges. Too terrified to move, they sit as this whirlwind of flame and fire grows and grows in strength, blowing open the windows, papers fly, it is hard to see through the wind and the flame.

Ultimately, this whirlwind of the Spirit lifts them from their seats, engulfs them and propels them out into the street where they are compelled to speak the Good News in the native tongue of the

listeners. Those gathered ask, “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” Curious indeed. It is a mighty act of epic proportions that leaves my heart pounding at the thought of living through it.

In the Gospel from John we heard this morning, we get quite a different picture. In John, it is the day immediately after the resurrection. The Pentecost event in John occurs in Jesus’ first appearance to the male Disciples after appearing to Mary Magdalene first the day before. Now while Mary went looking for Jesus in the tomb, a very risky move, the Disciples have shut themselves away in an upper room, with the door locked, hiding in fear. In John’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit is given to the Disciples by Jesus, not with a mighty wind and tongues of fire, but with a breath.

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

I wonder about this breath of Jesus. How close must he have been to breathe on them? I imagine that it was not a breath that one might use to blow out the candles on a birthday cake, trying to get the Spirit on all twelve before running out of breath. I imagine, rather, that he took each one’s head into his hands, put his head next to theirs and breathed gently and firmly on each of them while whispering, “Receive the Holy Spirit”. While there may not be scriptural warrant for my imagining of how it happened in that upper room, the Jesus I know would not have let the disciples off easy. Jesus would not have let them wonder if he meant that the Spirit was for each of them, individually, or just a general sort of suggestion. For me, the Holy Spirit’s descent in the upper room, arriving on Jesus’ breath would have been just as terrifying and equally compelling as the mighty wind and tongues of fire in Acts.

What is common to both stories of gift of the Spirit is that it came at a time when Jesus’ followers had to take stock of what they had just lived through, and what they would do now without Jesus walking with them.

I wonder, what were their heart’s desires? What did they want from God? What did they want from those who, with them, would become the Church?

In John, the Spirit is given the four days after his crucifixion. Four days the disciples spent locked in a room, paralyzed by fear. In Acts, Pentecost comes in the wake of Jesus’ second departure; First, his earthly departure and then his ascension into heaven. Those disciples and first followers of Jesus had just lost him a second time. They thought he was gone, and then he returned. Now he was gone again. How they must have wondered, “Now what? Now who will care for us, and teach us and sustain us?”

How their hearts must have ached. How they must have longed for God’s presence again. How they must have depended on their friends to see them through.

“Now what?” They must have cried.

And God answers. Now the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that flows throughout creation arrives on breath and wind and fire reigniting their hearts. The Holy Spirit. The Comforter. The Sustainer. The only possible gift in a time of deep despair.

Once again God finds a new way to draw us close, to bring us home.

It's an amazing story, is it not? And I don't know if I could believe it if I hadn't seen it myself.

As many of you know, this Saturday I will be ordained to the transitional Diaconate. A week from today, I will participate in the liturgy as Deacon here at St. John's. It will also be my family's last Sunday with you. Two weeks from today, I begin a new part of my ministry at Christ Church in Cambridge. It is a moment I have dreamt about since I was a child. It is something I have prayed for since I was twenty. It is something I have prepared for for the past five years. The time has come when, God willing and the people consenting, the Bishop will lay his hands on me and I will be made something totally new, though completely the same.

And the reason this is happening, my friends, is because St. John's is a place where Pentecosts happen. It happened here for me, like it has been for so many others; for many of you.

When my family and I came to St. John's, I was, in many ways, like the disciples in the days after Jesus' departure. I felt a deep sense of the absence of God in my life. We wanted to come to church because we were having a child, but I wasn't sure I was up for it. It wasn't always like that. Like the disciples, I had once enjoyed a wonderful relationship with God and walked closely with God as my friend, as my teacher, as my love. But the church isn't perfect. And it hurt me, and I felt as though everything I knew and believed about God had been taken away. Much like the disciples, I imagine. Much like many of you, I know.

But Pentecosts happened. Not just one, I might add, but many. In my time here, I have experienced moments that felt like mighty whirlwinds and tongues of fire; Over-the-top experiences of the passion and power of the Spirit. There have also been times of quiet and determined breath, as you held me in your hands.

Just as Jesus tells the disciples that, though no longer in sight, he would remain with them, that he would leave them the Spirit to carry them through, so here, too, the Spirit is alive and well; urging us on, lifting us up, getting us into trouble, making us family. Lighting fires in our hearts.

St. John's is a place where many of us come in, securely locked in our upper rooms. Over time, with love, we are encouraged to come out into the street and to feel the rush of the wind of God on our faces, to feel the Peace of Christ which is no Peace.

Like the Pentecost in Acts, St. John's strives to be a place where each of us can hear the Good News of Christ in our native languages. I'm not talking languages, like Spanish or Portuguese. I'm talking about our personal spiritual languages. I'm talking about those moments when we find ourselves saying, "Oh! I get it!" or "Oh, thank God, I'm home."

And so my encounter with the God of Pentecost here at St. John's has led me on a path toward ordination to the priesthood. Coaxed out of the upper room I was in six years ago, sometimes gently, and sometimes not so gently, my heart was broke open by Anne, and by all of you and I finally heard the Good News in a language I could understand. And now it's time for me to take what I've learned here to a new place. A difficult, but necessary, by-product of which is my family's departure from this, our spiritual home. It's hard to leave this place. It's difficult to imagine. We are more than a little sad. And I am very, very afraid.

Why should we believe it would be any different? You see, that's how both Pentecost stories end, or is it begin? The gift of the Spirit, in both Acts and John, propels the recipients out into the world, to the ends of the earth, to witness to new communities, begin new churches, to start new fires of the Spirit. As Gretchen reminded us at the Annual meeting, it's how the church grows, and thrives, and burns.

And so I go forth, alive with the Spirit I received in this place, emboldened to start new fires, spreading the Good News of God's passionate desire for each and every one of us.

That's my Pentecost story. But as we heard in today's reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, this same Spirit stirs many gifts. Many gifts, varieties of services, varieties of activities, but the same Wild Spirit.

What are yours? How is the Spirit working in you, and through you? What fires of God's passion are you setting out there, at work, at home, on Centre St.? Or are you locked in an upper room, too hurt, too wounded, and too afraid of opening your heart to yet another disappointment?

What is your heart's desire? What do you want from God? What do you want from the Church?

The Spirit can't wait to give it to you.

I don't want to leave without telling you two things from this pulpit. The last piece of advice we received on our retreat was to never miss an opportunity to tell those with whom you minister that you love them, and to mean it. So, first, I love you. all. very much. I mean it.

Second, I want you to know that God is so grateful to each and every one of you, and so very pleased with everything you do to make this a community where God's burning, passionate love can be known by all.

Peace be with you.

AMEN.