

Sermon, May 31, 2020

Pentecost

I've had a few people complain that virtual worship just isn't the same. For one thing, I always start live worship with a stupid joke, and they miss that. So here goes...a friend of mine was finally allowed to start her new job Friday. At quitting time, she saw the boss standing and staring at the paper shredder. She asked, "Can I help you with something?" He said, "Yes. I have a critical document here and I am not sure how to work this thing." So she took it, put it in the shredder and turned it on. And he said, "Thanks. I just need the one copy." So if you hear of any openings, please let me know.

Good morning! Welcome again to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and this morning Marci McClive and Dr. Tom Johnson will provide special music for us. They are members of the Marsh Mountain Consort recorder group.

While technically churches in most of Maryland are allowed to open, attendance is quite limited. No congregational singing is allowed, since the safe distancing for singing is about 24 feet. No communion, no collection plates; at-risk groups, including those over 65 years old and/or medically-compromised people, plus their friends and family members who live with or care for them should not attend either.

Masks are required and the social distancing required by the health department is seven feet, not six. That means only every third pew could be open, and each could seat only two socially distanced individuals or couples. No hymnals, bulletins or worship booklets would be allowed.

With those things in mind, Council has opted not to reopen at this time. God certainly does not want us to put ourselves or our loved ones at risk.

Meanwhile please stay safe, wear masks and continue to support your church. Our virtual Sunday School has been both fun and educational. Thank you – Nicole, Ashley, and Taylor for that. Sunday School’s summer break begins next week, but they may offer a few sessions over the summer, considering the circumstances. We’ll keep you posted.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. O God, on this day you open the hearts of your faithful people by sending into us your Holy Spirit. Direct us by the light of that Spirit, that we may have a right judgment in all things and rejoice at all times in your peace. Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the second chapter.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them

speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the twentieth chapter.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 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. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Today is Pentecost. You might be surprised to learn that Pentecost is considered the second highest holy day in the Christian Church calendar, just behind Easter and--believe it or not-- ahead of Christmas.

Funny since Christians didn't even invent Pentecost. I Googled Pentecost, and the first entry said, "Pentecost WAS a spring Jewish harvest festival." Wrong!

Pentecost STILL IS a spring Jewish harvest festival! The word Pentecost is a Greek word that means "fifty" or "fifty days" and in the Hellenized first century Near East, it was the name given to the Jewish festival of Shavuot—which falls seven weeks, or fifty days after

Passover. In fact, the Bible sometimes calls Shavuot the “Festival of Weeks.”

It is a pilgrimage festival traditionally tied to the harvest of the spring wheat crop. It is also the time of year when Jews commemorate the gift of Torah, received by Moses on Mount Sinai, fifty days after the first Passover.

In Jesus’ day, as many as 300,000 Jews from all over the region crowded into Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, offering sacrifices in the Temple, and thanking God for the successful harvest.

Spring is a precarious time for Near East agriculture. It is a season of high winds and strong storms that can seriously damage wheat fields—the crop so necessary for summer’s daily bread.

Once the wheat was successfully harvested, brought to market and stored, it was “party time” back then in Jerusalem. In fact, it still is. Last year on Shavuot I watched a YouTube live feed from Jerusalem’s Wailing Wall, and it was spectacular. This year Israel has been shut down by the pandemic much like we have been, but it is now beginning to relax some restrictions on public gatherings. Hopefully by next year Pentecost in Jerusalem will again be the joyous festival it has always been. Hopefully our lives will be more back to normal as well.

I imagine what I saw last year was much like the scene described in our first reading from Acts—with hundreds of thousands of Jews from distant lands gathered in the city. They too spoke so many different languages that many groups couldn’t really communicate with each other.

The language miracle of Acts chapter two certainly WAS remarkable. But was it really enough to elevate the holiday to be our number two?

The modern Pentecostal or Christian charismatic movement is one of the planet’s fastest growing religions. It is American in origin but has since

spread throughout the world. It began about a century ago in a storefront church on Azusa Street in Los Angeles when a one-eyed thirty-four-year-old Black son-of-slaves preacher named William Seymour preached a sermon to a mixed-race congregation on the subject of Acts chapter two—our first reading.

Suddenly Edward Lee started babbling incoherently. Six others joined in, including Miss Jenny Moore, who would later become Seymour's wife. The event attracted lots of press coverage, which was mostly negative.

The Los Angeles Times criticized not only what it called the weird howlings and babblings of worshippers that nobody could understand, but also bemoaned the fact that people of different races and backgrounds—Blacks, Whites and even Hispanic Americans were gathered, worshiping together, in the same church. A rare occurrence, even to this day.

Participants meanwhile were beside themselves. They were convinced they had experienced a repeat of the Pentecost miracle of Acts chapter two. They figured they too had been “baptized in the spirit” and could therefore preach the Gospel all over the world in tongues that would be heard and understood in native local languages.

Problem was, when charismatic missionaries began to do so in places like India, Japan and China all the locals heard were—well-- “Howlings and weird babblings of worshippers that nobody could understand.”

Oops.

Scientists ever since have been fascinated by the charismatic religious phenomena common to the movement, like speaking in tongues, spirit dancing, holy rolling and faith healing. In seminary I heard a recording of a very strange Pentecostal worship service called the Toronto Blessing. It involved a large group of the gathered laughing hysterically at nothing in particular, with some making animal sounds and

screaming. There are videos posted these days on YouTube, if you are interested.

Some have labeled such things mass hysteria, hypnosis or even induced psychosis. Others speculate charismatic behavior is just an overcompensation for secret inner feelings of shyness and inadequacy.

Most psychologists these days admit those who speak in tongues are for the most part just as normal as everybody else. They don't really understand why or how they do what they do, except to say that it is apparently learned behavior, and seems relatively harmless.

Some charismatics say they are speaking ancient biblical languages when they speak in tongues but language experts say no they aren't.

They are just making unintelligible words and noises drawing only on the sounds, syllables, inflection and cadence that are common to their own primary language.

Some claim the charismatic gift of interpreting tongue-speakers, but when translating they normally just repeat well-known and widely accepted statements of denominational doctrine. I admit I don't get it. Nobody really does. And I also admit to once being skeptical and even critical of so-called charismatics, but the older I get the less entitled I feel to judge anybody else's specific religious beliefs or practices. That's God's job, after all, and well above my pay grade.

I do know that in cultures that tend to be more accepting of charismatic phenomena tongues sometimes show up even in Catholic and Mainline Protestant denominations. I was surprised to learn that Justin Welby, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, admits to occasionally speaking in tongues himself.

Although the modern-day phenomenon has proven NOT to be a repeat of the Acts miracle of Pentecost, that doesn't mean modern charismatics

just made it up. There are earlier accounts of people speaking in tongues in the Bible, and the Sybils did it too!

The Sybils were priestesses at the Oracle at Delphi, many centuries before Jesus' disciples gathered at Pentecost. Through various rituals and incantations the Sybils worked-themselves up into frenzied states and then also spouted strange sounds.

They explained that's how one communicates with the Greek god Apollo. Well of course it is. Glossolalia—or speaking in tongues-- has been a part of other world religions too. In African and Aboriginal tribal cults, and among folk religions of the Asian Hmong and Caribbean Vodun. Some Native American healers and spiritual leaders speak in tongues when plying their trade.

They say they do so to communicate with animals or beings in the spirit world. I probably DO speak differently at times to my dog Stella than I do to my wife Laura. And I note that as a result the former normally WILL fetch a tennis ball while the latter pretty much won't.

We know from the New Testament's earlier books that speaking in tongues, found its way into the practice of some of Paul's early churches. It was probably adapted from pagan temple rituals. Paul acknowledged the practice but didn't seem to think much of it.

He told the Corinthians that it's love that communicates the Gospel, not tongues. He likened glossolalia-- to noisy gongs and clashing cymbals. In other words, he found it pretty annoying, even if not inherently wrong.

Personally I think the true repeatable miracle of Pentecost is that God's Holy Spirit acted to declare our faith, our church and its mission open for business to all kinds of people. You know, like Medes, Elamites, Parthians and Phrygians who were included among the chosen back then. You know what? They still are. People of different backgrounds and races with different spiritual gifts to give. The kinds of folks Paul

talked about in First Corinthians—like healers, teachers, preachers, prophets and the like.

Regardless of how they talk, what they wear, who they love, where they are from and what they think and what they look like, they too are beloved children of our same God. Called to get along with each other. And more importantly, to use their unique and particular gifts and talents, working together, to help those who struggle and those who are in need. That sounds a lot like our Church. Which I am proud to say is spirit-led, open and active in this world. Even while it's closed.

And if I'm right, then maybe that Storefront church on Azusa Street in Los Angeles really DID repeat the miracle of Pentecost. Not so much by making weird noises, but by welcoming people of different and mixed races, from all classes and backgrounds and walks of life to be a part of what we now know...as the one true Church.

Amen.