

May 31, 2009      The Festival of Pentecost  
Calvary Presbyterian Church  
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Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-21—the Pentecost story

Throughout the Easter season the first scripture reading has been an account from the book of Acts about Peter taking charge of the emerging church in Jerusalem, preaching powerfully, and bravely confronting the authorities. There has been an amazing change in this man since we met him during holy week denying that he was a Galilean, denying that he was a disciple, denying that he even knew this man, Jesus.

There has also been an amazing change in the community since we found them cowering behind locked doors on the first Easter, afraid of those authorities. For 40 days, the risen Christ had moved among them, teaching them from the scriptures and showing them by his presence what it all meant. And then he went away, as he said he would, and today we find the disciples gathered together, wondering what would happen to them now, wondering about this Comforter and Advocate that Jesus had promised would come to empower them. Let's listen to the story of how those amazing changes happened, let's listen for the wind of the spirit to move through us as we hear once again the story of that Pentecost when the church came into being. Acts 2:1-21

### The End of Easter

This day of Pentecost is the last of the three great festival days of our church year. First, there is Christmas with its wonderful promise of light shining in the darkness of midwinter; and then, Easter comes with its amazing promise of new life just as spring warms the air and opens the flowers, and then, at this most inconvenient time of the year, we get to Pentecost. Just when we are ready to wind down the school year and sports programs and Eagle's Wings and ESL classes and thank the Sunday school teachers and honor the graduates and finish the confirmation class; just when we are really ready to move into the slow down, do less, catch your breath, go to the pool, take a vacation, summer time; the church calendar insists that it is time to catch the Spirit and renew our enthusiasm for spreading the gospel and for being the church.

The culture around us doesn't give us much help for this celebration. Hallmark did not market a line of Pentecost cards for you to send to your family and friends. There are no Pentecost bouquets in the Teleflora catalogue. No one assumed you would need to send Pentecost flowers to your mother. The center aisle of CVS was not full of red kites and wind chimes and fake flames to decorate your homes—although someone on a worship team in the past here did find this amazing little gizmo that blazes on the chancel this morning to help you catch the spirit of the day. We've chosen this day to confirm two young people who are ready to announce that they want to be a part of the future of the church. We've done our best to create a festival feeling. I gave the kids balloons, there is a cake waiting for us in the fellowship hall, but it's still an uphill battle to try to engender enthusiasm for new beginnings at this time of the year.

We celebrate this day as the birthday of the church—the anniversary of the day when we were called out to become the visible Body of Christ in the world. Happy Birthday! Happy Pentecost!

Officially, this is the day that marks the end of the Easter season. We've put away all the white Easter hangings, and draped the pulpit in red for this morning. If you still have the end of the chocolate Easter bunny in the back of your fridge, it's time for him to go. We have set aside seven weeks on the church calendar to celebrate Easter. It's just too important to be relegated to only one Sunday. But, this is the end. It's time to return to Ordinary Time. The Pentecost word comes from the Greek for "50". It's the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Easter. In the Hebrew calendar it was the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover. For Jesus' friends, it was a celebration of the spring barley harvest, and also a time for remembering God's gift of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai—that gift that transformed a group of escaped slaves from Egypt into the Community of Israel; into the people of God. For us, it is a day for remembering God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the church—that gift that transformed that group of Jesus' followers into the Body of Christ. The Spirit, in the form of wind and fire, propelled them directly out into the crowded streets of the city to proclaim the gospel in language everyone could understand.<sup>1</sup>

The church is born in the confusion of the leader going away. This is not the company of frightened disciples that went out to the tomb on Easter morning expecting to anoint the dead body of Jesus. This is not the company of frightened disciples we found behind locked doors on Easter night when the Risen Lord appeared in their midst. This is the company of followers who had just spent 40 days with the Risen Christ, relearning every thing that they had ever been taught about the scriptures and speaking with him about the Kingdom: finally understanding that it was God the Father who had actually lived among them in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The name of the one God of Israel was both "Our Father," and "Jesus," the Son. But on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, the teaching Christ disappeared out of their sight, and the disciples withdrew to that upper room where the scripture tells us they "were constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14).

I think maybe they truly believed that was all they were called to do. To devote themselves constantly to prayer until Jesus would return on the day the "sun turned to darkness and the moon turned to blood" (Acts 2: 20a). Did you hear that in the scripture reading this morning? They were waiting there for the beginning of the End. They had lived through the turning moment of the history of the world. Everything was just about to be over. It was time to close up what they had been learning and finish all they were doing, and wait, in prayer, for "coming of the Lord's great and glorious day" (Acts 2:20b)—for the end of the world.

I wonder how much of a surprise the events of that first Pentecost were to those gathered? Did they know what they were waiting for? Did they know what they were praying for? Did they know what they were in for? Did they remember John the Baptist telling them, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming... and he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16)? Did they wonder what Jesus meant when he told them to remain in Jerusalem "until you have been clothed with power from above" (Luke 24:49b)? Did they hear his final words to them as he disappeared into the clouds, "You will

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<sup>1</sup> Stookey, Laurence Hull. *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 74.

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” (Acts 1:8)? Whatever they may have been expecting, I don’t think the Pentecost event recorded for us in the book of Acts was it. I don’t think they had any vision of the kind of power they were about to receive.

The wind and the flames blew through that room in Jerusalem, and not one of them remained the same. Peter, who couldn’t even admit to being a follower of Jesus 53 days ago, is now a powerful preacher. It says that 3,000 were convinced to be baptized after his first sermon on this day. Peter begins to have unimaginable visions about inclusiveness of Jews and Gentiles that will change the community forever. Peter gets such a reputation that people carried their sick friends out into the street believing that healing would come just from Peter’s shadow falling across them (Acts 5:15). As Jesus predicted, Peter becomes the rock on which the church was built. And the rest of those disciples—and some of their fiercest enemies—became the ones who did indeed become Jesus’ witnesses to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, and the ones who “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Who among them could have imagined it was not the end of things, but another beginning?

I have encounters with people all the time who tell me they are good Christians but they just don’t believe in the institutional church. I have lots of days when I don’t blame them. I don’t much want to be associated with the things I read about the church in the newspapers from time to time—about child abuse cases and that celebrity priest in Miami, and misappropriation of funds down in Louisiana and inciting violence in Africa. I hated the picture of the Catholic Church that I saw last week in the movie “Angels and Demons”. I don’t believe that violent evil resides within the bureaucracy of the Vatican—closed mindedness and refusing to be led by the winds of the Spirit moving in our world, yes, but the kind of evil that makes for exciting movies? I don’t think so.

A few years ago our Methodist friends tried to rent advertising space in Times Square. They were rejected. The Reuters folk who own that famous electronic billboard told the Methodist bishops that they don’t accept ads that are “pornographic, libelous, salacious, misleading, deceptive, or religious.” Interesting, the company we keep in the public mind these days. Some time ago, I heard someone say, “Jesus came announcing the kingdom of God, and what he got was the church.”<sup>2</sup> For better or for worse, this, you and me, gathered up into community praying and reading the scriptures together, refreshing ourselves at the table, teaching the faith to our children, equipping each other for the work of the kingdom—taking the gospel out to the ends of the earth—to Centerville and Dumfries and Mt Eagle and the Mt Vernon-Lee Daycare center, and the Pentagon and Mt Vernon hospital and everywhere else these folk around you go on Monday morning—this is the end of Easter. This is what came out of the events in Jerusalem so long ago—the Church; this flawed and splintered institution, reformed and forever reforming according to the Word of God and the Call of the Spirit.

The drama was not complete on Easter morning. That second act was so amazing, that some of the folk in the audience were satisfied and went home—alone to pray and wait for the end of the world. But it is in that third act of the drama, when God the Father and God the Son pour out

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Henry, Executive Director of the Institute of Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Collegeville, Minnesota, November 8, 2003, New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC.

God the Spirit onto the whole audience, that we put the whole story into perspective, that we hear the complete name of the one God of Israel: Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and that we are called up from the audience to be full participants in the ongoing and never ending story of God at work in the world. The Church of Jesus Christ that came into being on the First Pentecost and that you are a part of is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity (G-3.0200). We are called to be a sign in the world and a sign for the world of the new reality, which God has made available to everyone in Jesus Christ. A reality in which sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down. We are called in both our corporate life and in the lives of each one of us individually to give shape and substance to that truth. We have been called together and empowered to carry on Christ's ministry in the world. Christians without the church? Not possible. This is the end of Easter. This is what it was all about.

The End of Easter is to take the Spirit God has poured out on the church, on all of us, giving us dreams and visions, to take that Spirit out into a hungry and hurting world that needs all we have to give. They were empowered by the Spirit. They turned the world upside down. We have been empowered by the Spirit. We, too, have the power to make the world a better place. You are the End of Easter. May the Spirit overflow you this day, and every day!  
Happy Birthday. Happy Pentecost. What's next?