

Sermon for June 9, 2019, Pentecost
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
1 Kings 19: 1-18; Acts 2: 1-21
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Holy Spirit, come into our hearts and into these words and make them yours!

Living in the Spirit

Did you notice all the Pentecost Sale leaflets in this morning's paper? Have you gotten your Pentecost tree, yet? What about your Pentecost lights? I have to admit that I was a bit disappointed that there were no brightly wrapped Pentecost gifts waiting for me this morning. Pentecost should be right up there with Christmas and Easter, because without it the Good News of the birth and resurrection of Jesus might never have made it beyond a small group of frightened people in Jerusalem. But the Good News did spread, over more than a two-thousand year span of time, because of a gift.

We've just heard the story of the birth of the Church in a multitude of languages, so please allow me to add another. Here is the Pentecost Story from the "New Unrevised Rosemary Translation":

A long time ago, in a land and culture far away from us, there was light, and there was darkness. But the light was scared, terrified, and confused. The light consisted of eleven men who used to be fishermen. The light consisted of women of modest birth. The light consisted of some 120 other plain, ordinary folk who had witnessed the resurrected, long-awaited Messiah and had been touched and changed by that relationship forever.

Incredibly, the one they had followed, the one they had never quite understood, the one who they had seen die with their own eyes, had risen from the dead! Jesus, their leader, had come back to life and walked and eaten with them. They were overjoyed because now they could be followers again, and, as we all know, it's much more comfortable being a follower.

So this group really did not want to hear what Jesus was saying about leaving them again to go be with his Father, and they did not really believe him until they saw him taken up into the clouds. Then they realized that they were alone again, without a leader, and they were afraid. They returned to an upper room in Jerusalem, perhaps the same room where they had taken their last meal with Jesus, and they bolted the doors and prayed. That is where we find them at the beginning of our passage this morning.

Let's stop there. Does this situation—the loss of a well-respected, well-loved leader, resonate with any of you? I can think of several instances where a group of good people might feel left behind and filled with anxiety. When a fair-minded principal gets transferred, teachers often get anxious about who the next boss will be. When a well-respected CEO retires, employees begin to gossip about possible "changes," none of them pleasant. When a much-loved football

coach goes to another team, the fans feel betrayed and forsaken. When a longtime pastor leaves a church or dies, the flock starts to worry about how they will manage until the next pastor comes along. So, in some way, we can relate to those that Jesus left because we have been left, too. But remember, a gift is involved.

So our story continues. These disciples knew that the powerful Jewish authorities did not want them sharing the good news, and the Romans had had just about enough of their trouble-making, and wanted them quiet, one way or another. All around this small flock of followers, danger lurked, so they locked themselves away.

Let's stop there. These disciples had a mission; before his ascension, Jesus had clearly told them that they needed to share the Good News in Jerusalem and beyond. But they didn't want to budge, with good reason. They remind me of Elijah in our Old Testament story. Elijah was a faithful prophet who was trying to do God's will, and God's will was rather daunting. God wanted Elijah to tell the evil king and queen that they needed to change their ways and obey and worship God alone or trouble would befall them. When Elijah did so, Queen Jezebel was so angry she commanded that Elijah be killed.

What did Elijah do? He did what any of us would do. He ran for it! And then he hid. And then he complained. God was just asking too much of him! It would be better if he just laid down and died than have to face the king and queen again.

Think through your lives a moment. Have you ever known you had some kind of mission that you believed was worth getting done? You began this mission with good intention, with faithfulness, with energy, but then something set you back. Maybe it was a criticism. Or a miscalculation. Maybe it was fatigue or worry or despair. Maybe what you were doing was creating enemies, or you began to think you were the wrong person for the job, so you decided to throw in the towel and be done with it, or go on vacation and hide from it. In some way, all of us can probably relate to the disciples' and to Elijah's reluctance to move forward. That step would be difficult, if not for that gift.

Back to our story from Acts. So the disciples did not venture out but they did pray. And pray. And wait. They had no idea what to do or where to go, so they stayed huddled together and waited, not even sure what they were waiting for other than that Jesus, their Messiah, had said he would not leave them alone. He promised he would send a gift.

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting." (PP) Tongues of flame rested over the heads of both women and men, and when they spoke, they spoke in foreign languages that none of them had ever learned. Never had this group imagined anything so wild! Suddenly, their fear gave way to courage, enthusiasm, certainty and they realized what had happened. Jesus had kept his word! His gift had arrived, and they were set free.

Here is what happened next. People who heard the commotion came rushing to see what was going on, and to their amazement, no matter where they were from, they understood what was being said. This group of Spirit-filled people was proclaiming good news about young men and girls seeing visions and old men and women dreaming dreams! And that one over there, the fisherman named Peter, who they knew had betrayed his leader, was standing above all the rest, telling them, (PP) "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21).

Every one of them? Did Peter realize that some of them weren't even Jewish? That some of them were despised by the Jews? Did he also mean the Romans? The Egyptians? The Episcopalians? The Baptists? The Catholics? The unchurched? YES! And the crowd listened to more, and heard Peter say, "You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call." The gift of Christ was for everyone? Without going to newcomers' classes or Sunday School? All the crowd had to do was believe what they were hearing and witnessing: that Jesus Christ had died and risen for them, too. In the confusion and chaos where nothing was done decently and in order, three thousand people believed, and the church was born, because of the gift—the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But what about Elijah? Do we leave him hiding out in a cave? No. Even before the time of Christ's arrival, God's Holy Spirit was working wonders. It was part of creation, as Genesis tells us: "the spirit moved over the waters." (PP) What Elijah needed was courage and stamina, but the Spirit didn't come in flames or tornadoes or even earthquakes. Nothing dramatic happened to Elijah other than that he heard a "still, small voice," a whisper of God's breath. As he listened, he didn't begin to speak in other languages or speak to crowds. Instead, as he listened, Elijah found encouragement and fortitude in that silence, and he was sent back to finish his work, just as we are sent back to continue our ministries, finish our tasks, care for our ailing spouses or parents, pray for a wayward child, sit with a terminally ill person, confront the challenges of life, again and again because of the gift that promises we do not go it alone.

In both Biblical stories, those people willing to be opened to the Spirit encountered the living God exactly where they needed God in their current situations. The great noise of the Spirit at Pentecost and the quiet that followed the roar of the thunderstorm encouraged and empowered both the disciples and Elijah to do a new thing or to complete a personal call. But the story of the Spirit did not end with them. That story of living in the Spirit is not over. It continues here and now as we listen together to what God's will is for this faith community. It continues with each person here when we are intentional about stopping, about being still, and we listen for the quiet, small voice that dwells within each one of us--even when we feel overwhelmed, discouraged, tired, frustrated, or confused.

The Holy Spirit is a gift from Jesus, a gift for every single one of us, both young and old, male and female. (PP) The Holy Spirit is a gift from Jesus who prays for us, so that we need never be alone. The Holy Spirit is God's reminder that we are not orphaned, that what looks so daunting,

so out of reach, is possible because believers never go it alone; believers go it with God. What a gift to receive, this day, and every day of our lives!

Thanks be to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.