

Pentecost Revealed

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for
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Long ago, in the City of Jerusalem, an event took place that eventually gave rise to the Christian church. It occurred some seven weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection. His closest disciples had gathered in a house on the morning of Pentecost, a great annual celebration of God's giving of the Torah to the ancient Israelites at Mount Sinai, as well as their sacred pledge to abide by its instructions.¹ Being observant Jews, Jesus' disciples were no doubt getting ready to take part in the Pentecost festivities when their preparations were dramatically disrupted.

According to this morning's scripture reading from Acts 2, God's spirit suddenly filled the house, symbolized in the text by the arrival of "a sound like the blowing of a violent wind" and the appearance of "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:2-3, New International Version). The spirit entered the disciples and forever changed them. And in response, each immediately began to witness to the presence of God's kingdom and the teachings of Jesus, using language understood by everyone who was nearby.²

Just what happened to the disciples that fateful Pentecost morning in Jerusalem? I believe that Pentecost became very real for them. But, what does that really mean? To understand it better, let's take a closer look at what took place when the Israelites encountered God at Mount Sinai, over a thousand years earlier. This is where the heart of Pentecost can be found.

We know that after the Israelite slaves escaped Egypt, Moses brought them to Mount Sinai to meet God. There, God's spirit appeared before the Israelites in the forms of thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, billowing smoke, and a raging fire around the top of the mountain, all accompanied by an increasingly loud noise.³ Can you imagine what that must have been like? It was so much more than even those storms that passed us, earlier this week!

At the mountain, God proceeded to give the Israelites the Torah, instructions for how to center their lives in the Holy One and how to live in the world.⁴ God's teachings were dutifully written on papyrus and inscribed in stone.⁵ However, God made it clear that the Holy One's teachings should not be merely preserved for later reference. They also had to be written on the hearts and minds of the Israelites and enacted in their everyday lives, without delay.⁶

¹ Refer to the commentary on Acts 2 offered in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, ed., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Loveday Alexander, "Acts," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001):1028-1061.

² Refer to Acts 2:4-6 and Alexander, "Acts."

³ Refer to Exodus 19:6-19 and Walter Huston, "Exodus," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 67-91.

⁴ Huston, "Exodus."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

What took place at Sinai was a spiritual awakening, a powerful revelation of what it means to be a people of God. The Israelites rediscovered their ancestors' God. The people came to the realization that faithfulness to the Holy One required radical trust. It also necessitated that they view the world through the Holy One's eyes; as a good and gracious place filled with abundance. Further, the Israelites discovered that being faithful to God was about loving the entire world and all of its inhabitants, treating everyone and everything with reverence.⁷ And in the process of that awakening, they began the transformation from being slaves into a free people under the rule of God.

Through the workings of the Spirit, the Israelites came to understand that living as a people of God was a solemn and urgent commitment. They were being commissioned to serve as an example of how God earnestly desires all humanity to live in the world. The Israelites recognized that what they were being asked to do would be a difficult and dangerous task, something they would continue to struggle with for centuries. Even so, the Israelites embraced that vision of new lives and a redeemed world given to them by God. Their toils and sufferings would be worth it. As we heard in this morning's other scripture reading from Exodus 24, the Israelites made the free choice to enter into a covenant with God. It was a commitment they took so seriously that they endorsed it with blood, not only for themselves, but also their descendants.

What happened to Jesus' disciples in that Jerusalem house on Pentecost morning? The following poem by Mark DeBolt captures the experience very well.

**Not as a dove the Holy Spirit came
to the disciples gathered in a room,
but as a violent wind and tongues of flame.**

**A cyclone roared the ineffable name
as fire on each blushing brow did bloom.
Not as a dove the Holy Spirit came**

**to give sight to the blind and heal the lame
and raise the dead and dispel error's gloom,
but as a violent wind and tongues of flame.**

**The Breath of God is anything but tame.
Who dally with it dally with their doom.
Not as a dove the Holy Spirit came,
but as a violent wind and tongues of flame.⁸**

As God's spirit appeared to the disciples, much as it did at Mount Sinai, they experienced a great awakening in terms of what it meant to be faithful to the Holy One, as well as their Lord Jesus. Even though they had known God's life-giving Torah through Jesus' teachings and lived example, the disciples had become slaves to their human frailties and fears following Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. This

⁷ These key aspects of a life of faithfulness are presented and discussed in Marcus J. Borg's book, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), pages 25-42.

⁸ This poem, "Pentecost Villanellette," written by Mark DeBolt and originally published in his book, *For the Mystic Harmony: Collected Poems 1997-2011*, is reproduced with permission at the web site, *Art & Theology*, <https://artandtheology.org/2017/06/01/not-as-a-dove-two-pentecost-poems-by-mark-debolt/>. Accessed 15 May 2018.

hindered them from carry out the sacred task given to them by their Lord to provide the world with a vision of the Kingdom of God on earth. Not even their experience of Jesus' resurrection was enough to motivate them. It took the indwelling of the Spirit, a Spirit-inspired remembrance of the Sinai covenant, and a Spirit-empowered recommitment to that pledge to win freedom for the disciples and move them forward in their holy work. And move forward, they did, in both word and deed in spite of the dangers that awaited them. Oh, how they moved forward!

As this morning's scripture texts and Mark DeBolt's poem suggest to us, the celebration of Pentecost is not meant to be just a once-a-year observance. Rather, Pentecost should be our inspiration for how we live each and every day. We need to continually pay attention to God, embrace the Holy One's spirit, and be about the urgent work of giving sight to the blind, healing the ill, guiding individuals into new life, and rescuing the outcasts. Further, we must be purposeful and fearless in our witness to life under the Holy One's reign. The movement of God's spirit in our lives cannot be tame.

Sometimes we need to do bold things for the sake of our witness, such as publicly calling attention to unfair laws, racial bigotry, and social injustices, as well as seeking remedies for their impacts. This congregations work towards becoming an Open and Affirming church is also another bold witness. But on a daily basis, we can be a Pentecost people by revealing the Holy One's realm through small acts that make a real difference in the lives of others. One example before us this day is the making and distribution of lap quilts.

Surely, the Pentecost Spirit and it's urging of faithfulness to God were at work in the quilters. It was there as the they chose their fabrics, designed their patterns, and cut the squares. The Spirit of Pentecost moved the quilters to spend hours sewing the tops, making the backs and fillers, completing the stitching, and adding the knots. And in the end, a lap quilt was produced that spoke of God's presence and of the Holy One's realm, not through words, but by shapes, and colors, and feel.

No doubt, the Spirit of Pentecost will be present when these quilts are received and used. I think of homebound seniors limited in their physical abilities, denied the full freedom of movement, and feeling isolated from others. For those individuals, the gift of a lap quilt can serve as a gentle reminder that someone is concerned for their wellbeing, perhaps willing to also provide the gift of time, presence, and compassionate listening.

I think of the woman diagnosed with breast cancer as she struggles with the uncertainties of treatment, the changes in her body to come, and the impacts her battle will have on her ability to support and meet the needs of her loved ones. Covered in one of these quilts, she may find warmth and stability in the materials. She may also feel reassured that she is lovable from the gentle touch of the fabric and able to hang on to hope from the quilt's colors and design.

Finally, I think of the prisoner who lost his freedom due to a drug habit he couldn't overcome. Ashamed, repentant, and in great despair, he spends his days living behind walls and bars in fear, mourning the life he could have had. But, with the gift of one of these quilts, he might discover that like the quilt, his life has been made, one square at a time. Some were good and some were not. Even so, the not-so-good squares could be accepted and made part of a wonderful whole. For him, a quilt can speak of the possibility of redemption, healing, hope, and a return to society.

If you think about it, the individuals who made these quilts reveal the presence of the Pentecost spirit in their lives. They communicate the presence of God and the Holy

One's realm through the language of fabric, designs, and colors. It is a message of compassion, love, forgiveness, healing, acceptance, and hope that can be recognized by any who need it the most. This is what Pentecost is all about, an unwavering enactment of faithfulness to God, in small, as well as large ways.

Will you embrace the spirit and urgings of Pentecost in your life? Will you give it expression each and every day? How will you do it? I leave these questions for you to answer.