

Set our Hearts on Fire!
A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bek
Pentecost Sunday, Year B
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Ventura
May 20, 2018

Today we celebrate the Day of Pentecost which, for the Episcopal Church, is one of the seven principal feasts of the year.¹ It's also one of the traditional days for baptism and the renewal of baptismal vows.

Before we get to that, first, I'd like to recap what's been going on in this Christian story that we recite and remember each year. Next, I'll set the scene

¹ Book of Common Prayer, p. 15

and give us some of the important background information so that we can begin to understand what happened on Pentecost all those years ago. And, finally, I'll try to answer this important question, "What is our role in this continuing story that has been handed down to us from across the ages?" and offer some insight on what all this means for us today.

Recap: Previously, in the story of God's amazing love for the world, God the Father sent his only son to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary and made man. For our sake, he endured the difficult challenges and celebrated the blessings and joys of life, just as all of us do. Then, after sharing his Word and example with all who would listen, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; suffered death and was buried.

Most remarkably, on the third day, he rose from the dead and, for more than a month, presented himself to his disciples and others; the risen Christ.

On the 40th day, he departed; ascended into heaven. That's where we left off last Sunday. Today we rejoin the disciples on the 50th day after the resurrection. They are together all in one place, waiting.

Setting the scene: Jerusalem is filled to the brim with people who have come from around the world to celebrate a big and important Feast Day called Pentecost. That's right, the Jewish Pentecost predates the Christian one. The word Pentecost means 50th, and the Jewish day of Pentecost is also referred to as Shavu'ot or the Festival of Weeks.

What was their Pentecost, their 50th day celebration about? It commemorated the first fruits of the harvest being offered in the temple, it remembered how God delivered them from bondage in Egypt on Passover, and it celebrated the giving of the Torah 50 days later on Mount Sinai.

It is said that when the law was received at Sinai, the Ten Commandments were given with a single sound, yet when the voice went forth it was divided into seven voices and then seventy tongues, so that “every people received the law in their own language.” The notion of seventy languages is derived from the number of the seventy children of Israel that

came out of Egypt² which is interpreted to represent all the nations of the world. These sound waves from the mouth of the Lord were visualized as a fiery substance. That's what they came together each year to celebrate and remember.

In our 1st lesson this morning³, we join these Jewish pilgrims who have gathered from all over the ancient world in Jerusalem. And, as the Roman soldiers looked on, they wandered the streets making purchases in the marketplace and talked quietly amongst themselves about the man called

² Exodus 1:1-5 and Deuteronomy 32:8

³ Acts 2:1-21

Jesus, who 50 days before, had been crucified but whom, many claimed had risen from the dead.

What happened next, was quite amazing.

It occurred suddenly, the birth of the church. First there was a sound like the rush of a violent wind that filled the entire house where the disciples were waiting. Then divided tongues, as of fire, appeared. One of these “tongues of fire” rested upon each of the disciples and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to speak in other tongues, different languages, through the power of the Spirit.

And all of this made so much noise that it caught the attention of the people out in the street. A crowd gathered wondering what in the world was going on. When they realized that each of them was hearing, in their own language, a message about God's deeds and power, they were amazed and wondered, "What is the meaning of this!"

The disciples were in the midst of a transformation. In order to be ready, they had spent some time waiting, praying, and processing all they had experienced. Now, they were suddenly filled with the Spirit, the power and energy of God. They each became, in those moments, more than they ever thought they could be; stronger, bolder, braver than they had ever imagined. They were transformed into the likeness God intended for them.

Peter, who had earlier denied the Lord three times, stepped forward and preached a powerful message that day. He concluded by calling out to this crowd of amazed people from all over the world, saying, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And 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.” Acts 2:41 tells us, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

The disciples are not the only ones who are called to this ministry. We all are. We are the continuing line of people called to proclaim Christ’s redeeming love to the world. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not just for them, it

is for us as well. And so, on this day of Pentecost, with it's coming of the Holy Spirit and birthday of the church, we must ask ourselves an important question – what is our role in this continuing story that has been handed down to us from across the ages?

What does this message mean for us today? Pentecost Sunday in 2018 is influenced by a couple of big and important events in history. This weekend there was a royal wedding. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle became the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and were married at St George's Chapel on the grounds of Windsor Castle.

Our presiding Bishop the most Rev. Michael Curry preached at the royal wedding. He spoke about love. He's rather famous for saying if it's not about love, it's not about God.

The most important thing that we learn is love. The most important thing that we do is love. The most important things we say come from a place of love. The most important things we do are because we love. Love is the most powerful thing there is!

And yet, only two days ago, in Santa Fe, Texas, for the 22nd time this year, there was another school shooting. Ten beautiful children of God lost their lives. Thirteen more were injured. Hundreds, thousands, maybe millions

more were terrified. I am without words. These are our children. We must do more to protect them!

The world is filled with things that distract us, things that divide us and things that cause pain. Some seek power and are willing to get it any way they can.

Some, quite tragically, find power in guns and weapons.

Some, quite unfortunately, find power in money.

Some, quite disastrously, find power in dominance over others, always struggling to be best, always wanting to be on top, always fighting to win.

But, as our presiding Bishop pointed out in his sermon yesterday, there is a power which is greater than all others and that power is Love.

I urge you on this Pentecost Sunday to grab hold of the power of Love, the energy of God, the Spirit of hope and inspiration, and let God set your heart on fire! Love more, sacrifice more, pray more, give more, hope more, be more, because, filled with the Spirit, that is what God is calling you to do.

- Let us each become more than we ever thought we could be; stronger, bolder, braver than we've ever imagined.
- And then, let us go out and spread love in all the dark and hopeless places. This is your special calling, and it is mine as well.
- May we all be nurtured at this table, filled with this amazing spirit and sent forth to love and serve the world in the name of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia, alleluia! Amen.