

May 31, 2020, Pentecost

Acts 2:1-4
John 22:19-22

It is Pentecost. The Easter season comes to an end and the season of Pentecost begins. Pentecost marks the birth, the beginning of the work of the church. This Easter season we have been reflecting on the things we have been learning, the gifts we have been discovering or re-discovering, the blessings in our lives we are seeing in a new light in this pandemic, all in the hopes of taking them with us, when we leave our shelter-in-place lives – like Jesus leaving the tomb – and begin to re-engage with others, with life.

All through the Easter season Sundays I have spoken of our self-quarantine as a type of entombment, a kind of grave out of which Jesus rose. As negative as this sounds, there have been positives; many of the positives were lifted up in worship – the validation of Jesus’ teachings to care for the least among us, the value of community, the gifts of caring and sharing that have arisen in these days. We must not forget that Jesus’ entombment was also a place of transformation; his tomb a chrysalis.

Pentecost is traditionally known as the church’s birthday. It is, in fact, the recognition of the disciples being filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, which energized them, empowered them to leave their self-quarantine and tell the story of Jesus and his teachings. Church tradition has based this church-birthing gift of the Holy Spirit on the story in Luke’s account of the Acts of the Apostles. In this account the Holy Spirit came with the sound of a violent wind and appeared like tongues of fire over the disciples’ heads. Filled with, energized by the Holy Spirit the disciples could now speak in a variety of world languages, possibly in all world languages.

The message here in the Acts story is multi-layered. The disciples began to teach the world about Jesus, the church was

birthed, not due to the energy or ingenuity of one or all of the disciples, rather because they were empowered by God through the Holy Spirit. Another important lesson being taught here is that Jesus’ message is no longer just a reformation of Judaism for the Jews, but a movement which would fulfill the words of the prophets that the children of Israel would be a light to all nations. Thus, the empowering of the disciples with the ability to speak to the world in their vernacular.

(As a quick aside: this is why Pentecost at Amicable has traditionally used a variety of world languages in our Pentecost service. Which also explains why we included John 20:22 in Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Japanese, French, German, and Hindi.)

Acts is not the only place a “Pentecost” gift of the Holy Spirit appears in scripture. In John’s Gospel Jesus appears to the disciples in the midst of their shelter-in-place isolation and breathes on them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” For some this act sends shivers down their spines, fearing the spread of a virus. John is sending us back to the second creation story in Genesis, where God breathed life into the created-from-dust Adam. What John is telling us in this story is that the risen Jesus gives new life to the entombed disciples by the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate or Helper Jesus had promised to send them. (John 16:7) Trusting in this gift, which is essentially the ever-present presence of God, the disciples are encouraged and empowered to leave their self-quarantined existence and tell the world about Jesus.

When the disciples left their quarantine and began to tell the world about Jesus, they were not pushing a doctrine, like Jesus is God-incarnate or God’s child, they taught people about a way of life, a way of living in community that Jesus had lived and taught them. It is a way of life based on complete trust in God. Jesus’ followers took on and shared the faith of Jesus in God, not faith in Jesus. If there was an encouragement of

“faith in”, then it was having faith in, trust in the way of life Jesus lived and taught.

Like the disciples, we are very much in need of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Helper. As we begin to see a loosening of our shelter-in-place government directives, we are, in essence, being invited to leave our entombment. For many of us this is a scary thought. The coronavirus is still very active and there is no vaccine, but at some point we are going to have to move out.

Let me be very clear here: I am NOT advocating for everyone to leave their homes and do whatever, with whomever one wants. I love you too much to encourage you to do that. What I am encouraging you to do is examine very closely how you were living before the pandemic changed the rules of the road and what you hope to do differently now. I am praying you will try to make living out Jesus’ teachings in your own life a top priority, just as the disciples did.

The first place this can happen in our lives is being careful and care-filled when we do venture out. Our government’s recommendations are a great to do list to follow. Wash your hands regularly, wear a mask in public when you know you will encounter others, allow for physical distancing when you are out in public. As we do this, it is important to remember why we do it: First, and foremost, we do this to protect the health and well-being of others.

As we feel anxious and uncertain about the future, as we ponder leaving our self-quarantine, I want you to stay focused on what this Easter season has taught us: the power of community and how it reassures us when we are feeling so alone; the importance of family and friends, especially our elders; the joy we have found in taking time to garden or sew or puzzle; and, the emphasis on caring for the least among us,

as we see who are the true essential workers – CNA’s, janitors, garbage collectors, truck drivers, grocery store clerks.

To stay focused on being an active part of community, caring for our loved ones, taking time for re-discovered gifts, and advocating for the well-being of essential workers, in other words, following the teachings of Jesus, following the Way will require renewed energy and strength in these anxious and uncertain times. It will require the help of the Holy Spirit.

Whether it is “tongues of fire” or “breath”, the gift of the Holy Spirit is both energizing and empowering. The receiving of this gift continues in the church, symbolically through baptism, which nothing more and nothing less than the promise of passing on to the next generation the teachings of Jesus; a willingness to follow in the way of Jesus, trusting that such willingness will be rewarded with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Helper.

On this Pentecost Sunday I want to encourage you to set your fears and anxieties aside and, trusting in our ever-present God, re-commit yourself to following Jesus out of the tomb of fear and darkness and into the light of God’s healing love; a love that fills us completely, when we are willing to share love unconditionally.

Jesus has promised us that such faith, such trust will be rewarded with the gift of the Advocate, the Helper, the Holy Spirit.

May you be blessed with such faith and, whether it is by tongues of fire or breath of God, may you receive the Holy Spirit. Amen.