

The Day of Pentecost – Year B – May 31, 2009
Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
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It was a late Friday evening in January and I was returning from a business trip. At the airport, I was grateful, as always to see my husband's smiling face waiting at the gate. We drove back together through white lined highways on icy roads. There was at least eighteen inches of snow packed into frozen mounds where the plows had tossed it aside, and the temperature was hovering around minus twenty degrees Celsius. We arrived home to find the lights blazing, our friend looking upset and worried, and the local police. Someone had decided to try and burgle our home. After breaking the locked screen door, and failing to force the locks on the front door, they'd gone to the back of the house. The security bars were cut and so was the basement window. They were determined and no doubt thought that they had all weekend to clean out the house. The door to the small basement room was alarmed, and the alarm was set. Despite having alarm company stickers and signs all over the windows and around the house, this had not deterred the would-be thieves. When the police had arrived, they had started working through the phone's speed dial list until they found someone who lived locally, having first woken up my Mom in England at about 3 a.m. her time!

It's nine o'clock in the morning in Jerusalem. There's a big crowd because it's the Jewish festival of Pentecost, held fifty days after the presentation of the first sheaf of the barley harvest. There is another type of in-breaking going on. For the disciples and on-lookers alike it is nothing short of astonishing. The details, shared by Luke in the Book of Acts, are stunning. But first, let's catch up on the events leading to this remarkable Pentecost. At the end of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has been taken into heaven in the presence of the disciples, and they have returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and praising God in the Temple. Before ascending into heaven Jesus promised they would be clothed with power from on high. I wonder if they had any idea exactly what and how "being clothed with power" would look like. They have witnessed Jesus' death and resurrection. They have seen the resurrected Lord being carried up into heaven. Now as they gather in community, there is a sudden and violent rushing sound. Divided tongues of fire appear amongst them and they are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing gentle about the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit. It is drastic, radical, all-encompassing and life-changing. This is the same incredible power that swept away chaos by the Word of God at the creation of the heavens and earth; that brought the miraculous gift of life to Mary's virgin womb; that drove Jesus into the wilderness; ripped the Temple curtain in half at His death; and raised Him from the tomb. The Holy Spirit is awe-inspiring. Not for me at least the sweet, ephemeral, insubstantial being of William P. Young's *The Shack*. What's more, you and I have access to this same power of God. It is the life-giving Spirit that brought about the birth of the Christ's Body, the church, and continues to inspire and sustain her. We must also give the Holy Spirit credit for her work of convicting and converting hearts to God in Christ Jesus. She disrupts and disturbs, unsettles and upsets, but she is no thief in the night.

Back in Montreal, the temperature is dropping rapidly as the freezing night tightens her wintry grip. It's now two o'clock in the morning. Nothing seems to be missing from the house. It looks like the burglars panicked and fled at the sound of the alarm. It took us about an hour to find the terrified cat, clean up the glass and muddy snow from the storage room. We have just finished cutting and nailing up several planks of two by four to seal out the weather and close the wound of this wholly unpleasant violation to our well-ordered lives. We retreat to bed, emotionally exhausted, and getting angrier by the minute at the sheer stupidity of those who ignored the signs.

The followers of Christ may not have known just how they were to be baptized by the Holy Spirit and fire, but they at least immediately recognize this gift of God. It was *the* Word who created the heavens and the earth. It was twisted words that led to humanity's fall into sin and death. It was the Word made flesh that opened the way of salvation for all the world to be reconciled to God. Now, tongues of fire have appeared and are resting on each of the disciples. Hear again the very first gift of the

Holy Spirit as she empowers those who know and love Jesus. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages... Amazed and astonished the crowd... hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” From tongues of fire, the very first gift of the Holy Spirit is to speak through tongues of flesh proclaiming God’s deeds of power to the world.

The disciples see the divine in-breaking as the fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus did not humble Himself in His humanity to start a new religion. His coming, His death, His resurrection are all foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures for those with ears to hear the Word. Peter addresses the crowd reminding all of Joel’s prophecy, wherein we discover at least two things. We are now in the last days, or the end times. However long that period of earth history is to be, and remember that only God knows – the end times were initiated by Jesus’ defeat of sin and death on the cross and in His resurrection. Secondly, we learn that God has now poured out His Spirit upon all flesh -- without social distinction. The gift is for all people, all nations, slave or free. According to Joel’s prophecy, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. God truly shows no partiality, His gift of salvation is available to all. There is no distinction by gender or age either. God’s sons *and* daughters shall prophesy. Young and old shall see visions and dream dreams. The Holy Spirit comes to all who will receive her, through what Martin Luther calls the “external word” or *externum verbum*. She speaks in the language of each individual, and convicts our hearts with the Truth that is God’s Word made flesh, Christ Jesus our Lord. But the Holy Spirit also comes to dwell with us as the continuing presence of God in all believers and in the world. The indwelling Spirit is in my heart and yours, guiding us in all truth. Then there is the indwelling Spirit that is the dynamic and commanding force giving life to the whole Body of Christ and her mission in the world. Wherever there are signs of love, peace, and justice, the Holy Spirit is at work in the world.

We have just heard about the response of the faithful who, by God’s grace, can see and hear the signs. Let’s turn now to the response of the world. The power of the Holy Spirit that the earliest community of the church proclaims as a gift from God is mocked by those who are full of self and the world. Just as they once accused Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard, they now scoff at the disciples and accuse them of drunkenness. There’s no humility in the world’s response to God, just sneering cynicism. The gift of the Holy Spirit did not send the disciples into ecstatic speaking in tongues, in the way that Paul describes in his first letter to the church at Corinth. By the love of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit unites all in understanding and community, even in the diversity of language. Those who heard declared that they understood in their own mother tongue without the benefit of translation of any kind. The tongues of fire ignited sparks of faith in the hearts of many. The fire of faith cleanses, purifies, heals and brings warmth, light and comfort. In those who would mock God’s gifts, the Word was lost in burning pride, and acerbic denial.

Four months later as the spring thaw eats up the snow around the house, we find a small flashlight lying on the grass outside the now restored basement window. Despite being buried for so many months, when we flick the switch, it still works. The Light has come into the world, it “shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). Not then, not now, not ever. The power of the Holy Spirit is here, it fills each and every follower of Christ, it fills you and it fills me. May our own tongues continue to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak boldly of God’s love and grace in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.