

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, June 5, 2022

Pentecost Sunday

Procession and Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

on

Romans 8:14-17, 22-27; John 14:8-27

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That Fire which Once Descended

Violent Wind all around, Flickering Fire above each of them, New Speech, New Tongues, New Understanding and Dialogue. These divine forces all converged upon the disciples on a very special morning, the morning of Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, the evening and then day when Jews celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses and their people long ago on Mount Sinai. As it is recounted in the Torah:

“And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.”

Violent Wind and Smoke, Flickering Fiery Lightning, New Understanding and Dialogue, and on top of that, earthquakes and trumpets. Now the experience of the disciples on the Temple Mount was not on that grand of a scale, but their Pentecost was similarly dramatic and did rhyme, so to speak, with what Pentecost celebrated. The associations are all there.

Now they called the feast day “Pentecost,” the Greek word for fiftieth, because this festival took place fifty days after another solemn feast of the Jews, the Passover. Like Passover, Pentecost was one of the Pilgrim Festivals, the city and Temple precincts would have been swollen with all of the able-bodied males who were required to travel to the Temple and offer as a sacrifice two loaves of bread that had been taken from the first fruits of their harvest. This would be why so many residents of different lands were there. And these same pilgrims would have all been present during the events of Jesus' passion and death at the last Passover fifty days before.

Unlike the pilgrims, the disciples had been there ever since Jesus had ascended to heaven, ten days before. Luke tells us that they were continually in the temple, blessing God as they had been blessed. They were following Jesus' direction during his Resurrection who told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to stay there to receive a baptism in the Holy Spirit.

I think about how astonishing it is that the disciples had the courage to return to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets, the city that killed their Lord, the city that would ultimately kill a number of them. It wasn't their first impulse, I remind you. A full seven of the disciples, Peter, Nathaniel, James, John, Thomas, and two that aren't named, they all go back to fishing of the Sea of Galilee. They meet the Risen Christ there,

they have an extraordinary haul of fish because of it. But Jesus tells them to feed his sheep, to follow him, and, thanks be to God, they do.

This is one of the most important characteristics of the resurrection. Somehow, in meeting the Risen Christ, His friends are made newly courageous and hopeful. They don't curdle into resentment and vengeance. They meet him, again. They leave their nets *again*, and return to the lion's den. There they witness Jesus depart, and then they begin their vigil in the Temple's courts to look for his return, as he promised, not knowing quite what to expect, but ready to receive what will come.

And what they receive looks something like how it all began on Mt. Sinai. And what they receive looks something like how the prophet Joel proclaims how it all will end on the Last Day. They received wind and fire and profound understanding. But it wasn't just for them. What they experienced was witnessed by the pilgrim throng. Some laughed as if they were drunk, but others drew closer, took them more seriously, perhaps the events of the past Solemn Festival had been working on their hearts, too, and this was adding fuel to that fire.

Peter then preached a cracker-jack sermon, from top to bottom, taking them through the Final Judgment, the horror of the Crucifixion, and the promise of the Resurrection, proclaiming Jesus that they killed as their Lord and long-hoped for Messiah. He cut them to the heart, it is said. Another way to say this is that they "received the Spirit of Truth," as Jesus once put it. And when Peter said "repent" they did. And when Peter said "be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" they did. Three thousand of these pilgrims, seeing and hearing anew, with a ritual immersion to claim that gift as their own. We think that the baptism might have taken place in one of the cleansing baths of the Temple. (It would have been one the few places that would have accommodated so many people.)

And from then on, they devoted themselves to being taught by the disciples, to break bread together and to pray together, everyday meeting in the Temple, and everyday growing in numbers. And so rather than abiding in their fear, despair, and grief, the disciples were miraculously given life again by the Spirit and Breath of God, and they also received the gift to preach the gospel and the gift to baptize more into their fellowship, a fellowship that continues this very morning. If we are going to call this Pentecostal burst of magnifying energy the "birthday of the church" or "the birthday of *this* fellowship" then it is the Temple which was the womb of the church, and the nursery of our fellowship.

But this was not a safe place, really. The church's birth is sandwiched between two calamities, the death of Christ and the untimely deaths of most of the disciples, ushering in a few centuries of persecutions, all under the shadow of the Temple's destruction by the Romans less than 30 years later. Life had been hard for them, and life would continue to be hard. What could possibly help them through a holy life that would be punctuated by murderous violence that would be indomitable, sometimes from the law, sometimes from the mob. How did they respond to such undeserved evil? Well, they endured in peace, not revenge. They honored their dead. They broke bread, forgave, and healed. They prayed for their enemies. And their fellowship grew, oftentimes composed of enemies past! All kinds of peoples, even the Romans, all sorts, caught up in the same wind, illumined by the same fire, and bound together by a common understanding of death and life revealed by the cross of Christ.

Like the birthday of a new universe, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the Big Bang on the Temple Mount that is still expanding throughout the world and in the realm of the human heart, pushing out through deepest darkness, with streams of fiery love that unite us in communion that is often beyond what words can say.

I'll close with a selection from George Herbert's poem about today, from his 1633 collection: *The Temple*.

Listen sweet Dove unto my song,

And spread thy golden wings in me;
Hatching my tender heart so long,
Till it get wing, and flie away with thee.

Where is that fire which once descended
On thy Apostles? thou didst then

Keep open house, richly attended,
Feasting all comers by twelve chosen men.

Such glorious gifts thou didst bestow,
That th' earth did like a heav'n appeare;
The starres were coming down to know
If they might mend their wages, and serve here.

Lord, though we change, thou art the same;
The same sweet God of love and light:
Restore this day, for thy great name,
Unto his ancient and miraculous right