

Sermon, May 28, 2023

Acts 2:1-13

“Opening Our Lives to the Holy Spirit”

In the first chapter of Acts the Risen Christ leaves his disciples with a few final words. It says, “While staying with them , he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.” I place an emphasis on the word ‘*wait*’ . In the June issue of our newsletter, I wrote about how waiting is an important dimension of the journey of faith, recognizing that God acts in his own way and in his own time. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? ... those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint!”

I know that at my age it would be great to run and not be weary - even walk and not get tired. But we really must hear Isaiah’s words in a spiritual rather than a physical way! To mount up with wings like eagles is to rise and find the courage, the strength, and, indeed, the faith to meet the challenges of our day. But to do so requires an openness to the “ promise of the Father” that Jesus spoke of, i.e. , the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

On that first day of Pentecost a group of disciples, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, had been waiting patiently for that promise to be filled, when suddenly they heard the rush of a great wind - the word wind being synonymous with the word spirit - and tongues like fire descended upon them, filling them with God’s Holy Spirit - transforming them into something new - giving birth to the Body of Christ which we call the Church!

When we too are open in heart, mind , and spirit, to that possibility, we too can be renewed, we too can mount up with wings like eagles. And so, we pray for God’s Holy Spirit to descend upon us today and every day. We pray that we may be a church in the power of the Spirit!

But there is something else about what took place in that Upper Room that should not be overlooked. In the eleventh chapter of Genesis, we find the story of the Tower of Babel, which speaks of the descendants of Noah who came into the land of Shinar, and they said, “ Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” First, it is an ancient story that attempts to understand why humanity is divided by language and culture, but it also points back to the story of Adam and Eve. Remember that their fall was brought on by pride and

the desire to defy God. Here the descendants of Noah are doing the same by seeking status and fame, and challenging God's authority by building a tower that reaches the heavens. This angers God, but He decides to be more lenient than when he sent the flood, and, instead, chooses to confuse their language, and as the story ends it says, "...the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth." Of course, the confusion of language symbolically can be seen as disunity on the earth, brought on by either the inability or the refusal to understand one another.

The story of the Upper Room is intended to bring about the reversal of that disunity. As the Holy Spirit descends upon those in the room they begin to speak, and to understand different languages. Again, we can also discern the ability to understand different languages as having the ability to understand different cultures. The more we can understand and appreciate different cultures, the greater the chance of unity among all of humankind.

I can speak of this from personal experience. I lived for fourteen years in northern Queens where there are about 190 different languages spoken, translating into a great diversity of cultures living together. Of course, this was not without certain tensions, but for the most part the population lived with a degree of civility - and, personally, I found it to be very educational and satisfying to learn of and appreciate the idea of unity within diversity.

Naturally, there will be those who will sneer at such unity as did those who accused those in the Upper Room of being filled with new wine - in other words, drunk. But remember something that Jesus said in the fifth chapter of Luke. "...no one puts new wine into old wine skins ; otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wine skins." Put in spiritual terms, this means that for us to better understand that which, leads to greater unity in the world, and in the Church itself, there must be a transformation within us - a transformation of heart, mind, and spirit - that we must become as new wine skins, and this transformation is best brought about by the infilling of that which is symbolized by new wine, that being, the Holy Spirit! When the Church dwells in the power of the Holy Spirit it is better equipped to spread the news of God's love for his creation, including all of humankind, and with that Good News bring about greater peace and harmony! Amen.

**Let us pray:** Gracious and loving God, as always, we praise your Holy Name, and offer our thanksgiving for all the many blessings of this life. We are grateful for the gift of your Son, Jesus, who came that we might be free from the taint of sin and the fear of death. On this day of Pentecost, we celebrate the birthday of the Church, brought about through the descent and the infilling of your Holy Spirit. We pray this morning for the renewal of your Church throughout the world, and we pray for the renewal of our own congregation. May your Holy Spirit descend upon us today and on all the days to come , filling us with New Wine, making us a church alive in the power of the Spirit.

Also, on this Memorial Day weekend, we offer our prayers for those who lost their lives in defense of our freedom which we cherish, and that you give comfort to those they left behind. Let us as a nation always stand up for freedom both here and throughout the world. We also lift up before you those with special needs, remembering.... Amen.

**Note:**

Apologies to those who tried to join us on Zoom this morning. Will investigate the problem so we will be back online next Sunday!

Also, a reminder that next Sunday we will be having a special celebration for the graduations of Jahir, Mario, and Poppy. Hope you will come and join us!