

Sermon, May 19,2024

Romans 8:22-27

“With Sighs Too Deep For Words”

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*’ . 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 have to hear Isaiah’s words in a spiritual rather than a physical way! To mount up with wings like eagles is to rise up 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 confusing 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.

In this morning's reading Paul first places things on a universal scale, saying, "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now". Words that can be taken as very pertinent to our own times as the whole of our planet cries out for environmental healing, but then Paul shifts to us as individuals, speaking of us as "the first fruits of the Spirit". And notice that he too insists upon the importance of waiting - waiting for the fulfilling of God's will, not only for it to transpire within creation as a whole, but within our personal lives as well. And, so, we are bid to open our hearts and minds to the movements of the Spirit, remembering, again, that God's ways are not our ways. As Jesus said in the third chapter of the Gospel of John, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit".

And we are bid to pray, but we do not always know how to pray, or what to pray for. But, as Paul says, "the very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words". The Spirit comes to us in the form of communication and inspiration in ways that transcend the boundaries of human speech. The Spirit speaks to our own inner selves, "because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God". (Take note that when Paul refers to "the saints" he is not using our usual understanding of the word 'saint'. It simply means the members of the church.) And, so, as we saints look to the challenges that lie before us, we must do so with hearts and minds open to those "sighs too deep for words". 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, in particular, we pray for the renewal of our own congregation. May your Holy Spirit descend upon us today and on all the days to come , inspiring us with sighs too deep for words, filling us with New Wine, making us a church alive in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.