

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 20, 2018
Pentecost Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 33:12-15
I Corinthians 12:4-13
John 20:19-23

Pentecost, which we celebrate today, is the scene of perhaps the most spectacular event in all the New Testament. To understand better the magnitude of what is happening, we need to provide a bit of context.

The word “Pentecost” is from the Greek word that means “fifty,” or “fiftieth.” In Hebrew the word is *Shavuot*, meaning “feast of weeks,” because it occurred on the day following a “week of weeks” (7 times 7 days), counting from Passover (cf. Lev. 23:15-16).

Pentecost was one of three feasts that all Jewish males were required by law to observe in Jerusalem. It was originally a celebration of the beginning of the harvest season (cf. Ex.23:16). Over time, however, Pentecost grew in significance. By the time of Jesus and the apostles, it had become primarily a celebration of the giving of the Law to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

This makes sense, because as Passover recalled the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, so 50 days later the feast of Pentecost marked that great event at Sinai. There, Moses received the law of God and renewed God’s covenant with His chosen people.

Thus, by the first century the Jewish people came to see Pentecost as the completion of Passover. What God had begun in Egypt, God sealed by the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai.

Pentecost was thus a great feast day, and those Jews who lived in distant lands (Luke lists them here from East to West) fulfilled their duty by traveling to Jerusalem. The city's population swelled with these folks who were ethnically Jewish but culturally and linguistically diverse. It was a setting bustling with activity and great festivity.

Meanwhile, at the same time, the apostles were gathered in Jerusalem, waiting in quiet expectation. They knew something big was coming, because Jesus himself had promised as much when he took leave of them at his ascension.

Remember his words to them? Luke reminds us of what Jesus said:

Then he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, "you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit...And you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." (Acts 1:4-5,8)

The disciples knew, also, of the promise of the Holy Spirit from Jesus' words at the Last Supper. The Spirit was the One who would be sent to remind them of everything Jesus had taught them, and to lead them into all truth.

In the forty days after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples and taught them. Yet as he did, he trained their gaze forward in time, as though his

work was not yet done, as though the “New” Passover awaited its completion, just as the original Passover found its completion at Sinai with the giving of the Law.

After Jesus’ ascension, the disciples have now once again returned to a room, and once again they lock themselves in. They take care of some important business, as they determine a replacement for Judas to carry on his apostolic office. But mostly they pray, as Jesus has instructed them to do. Luke describes the scene for us: *All of these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.*” (Acts 1:14)

As Acts chapter 2 unfolds, it does so like the detonation of a bomb. The sound of a rushing mighty wind comes from heaven, filling the house. Tongues of fire descend and rest on those gathered, and they are all filled with the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in other languages as the Spirit enables them.

These physical manifestations would have reminded those present of the giving of the Law at Sinai, where the mountain shook, and there was smoke and fire. And here, on the anniversary of Sinai, comes fire from heaven and the rush of a mighty wind.

All of this causes quite a commotion, and people gather to see what’s going on. Peter stands up to preach, quoting the prophet Joel:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, on my

menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

As he preaches, Peter describes the “last days” in terms of what is happening *now* on this very day. The Spirit has been poured out, and the effects are visible. From the moment of Pentecost forward, gifts once reserved for a few – such as prophecy – would now be distributed widely, from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond.

As God had once given the Law to Moses, so now He gives His own Spirit to the Church. The Apostles had already been commissioned to do what Jesus had done. *Now, they were empowered to do so.* Every person baptized that day received, to some degree, a share in the Apostles’ mission – for they received a share in the life of Jesus Christ. In Baptism they became “partakers of the divine nature.” (2 Pet. 1:4)

Some years earlier Jesus had said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful.” Now, the great harvest begins here at Pentecost, the feast of the harvest. At every level, the ancient feast found its fulfillment on this day in Jerusalem. The harvest was in. The new Passover reached its completion. The new exodus brought a renewed Israel to receive the new law – the law of God written on human hearts – and now the New Covenant would extend to the very ends of the earth.

What’s more, this would be the task not of scholars, financiers, armies, or even kings, but of rough and tumble men with limited abilities. The apostles

received the divine power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the work Christ had assigned them.

Early in the book of Genesis the story is told of how the people of the earth became peoples *opposed to one another*. It is the story of the tower of Babel. All subsequent history followed this same narrative, a story of *endless division*.

Pentecost reversed this process. Pentecost repaired the breaches, restored broken bonds, and gathered the firstfruits – the tribes of Israel – from their dispersion.

Soon salvation would go out to all the nations, including the Gentiles. And the gift of Pentecost would be extended to every believer through the ministry of the Church.

So, let's try to summarize all of this. Back in Holy Week, if you recall, we learned that Jesus was the “new” Moses who had come to lead God's people on a “new” Exodus. This “new” Exodus would be deliverance not from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin.

And as the original Exodus began with the celebration of the Passover and the eating of the sacrificial lamb, so also the “new” Exodus began with the Passover, with Jesus himself as the sacrificial Lamb. As the New Passover Lamb, Jesus' body would now be perpetually consumed under the appearance of bread and wine in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

And as the original Passover culminated in the giving of the Law of God at Mt. Sinai, so also the New Covenant is culminated by the writing of God's law on human hearts through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and the harvesting of all peoples into the covenant family of God through the ministry of the Church.

The Church, then, is the physical manifestation in the world of the New Covenant. It is the mystical Body of Christ. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Church invites *all* people to become part of the New Exodus under the leadership of a New Moses who is himself the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Church, empowered by the Spirit, continues to make Christ present to the world, until he comes again in glory to receive her to himself.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.