

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 24, 2015
Pentecost Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 33:12-22
I Corinthians 12:4-13
John 20:19-23

We come together once again at a very significant point in the Church year and in the life of the church. Today is Pentecost, the day we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost marks the conclusion of the “Great 50 Days” of Easter, and it marks the birth of the Church. And because of the Spirit’s coming and the Spirit’s empowerment, the church becomes the extension of Jesus’ ministry.

Pentecost is a classic example of how many of our Christian forms of worship are based in ancient Jewish practices. Pentecost was an ancient Jewish feast and a major festival for the children of Israel in the Old Testament. In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, God instructed the people to bring him special offerings from the harvest. At the beginning of the harvest, they were to bring him some of the “first fruits,” which were often the first figs or dates that ripened. This usually happened near Passover.

But then seven weeks after the first fruits of the harvest appeared, the people were to bring God special offerings from the completed harvest. Thus, Pentecost was also known as the “Feast of Weeks,” because it occurred seven weeks after

Passover. For the Jews, there were three feasts that were so important that adult males were required to attend them each year. Pentecost was one of those feasts.

This explains Luke's comment from Acts 2:5: "Godly Jews from many nations were living in Jerusalem at that time."

From the time of the Babylonian captivity, Jews had been dispersed throughout the world. In the first century, these persons were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. But because Pentecost was an important feast, thousands of pilgrims were in Jerusalem to observe it, to celebrate and give thanks for the harvest.

This explains the miracle of hearing that occurs, as the Spirit descends and gives to those who were gathered in the upper room the ability to speak in different languages so that these dispersed pilgrims could hear the Gospel in their native languages.

This is also a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, where prophets like Micah and Isaiah spoke of how when the Messiah would come, he would gather Jews who were dispersed throughout the world back to Jerusalem to participate in God's reign.

Isaiah says:

In the last days, the Temple of the LORD in Jerusalem will become the most important place on earth. People from all over the world will go there to worship. Many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Israel.

There he will teach us his ways, so that we may obey him. For in those days the LORD's teaching and his word will go out from Jerusalem. [Is. 2:1-3]

Pentecost also came to be associated with God's giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And if you read about God giving the Law to Moses in Exodus, and you read about the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, you will see remarkable parallels and similarities in the two events.

For example, Moses calls on the children of Israel to prepare for and to wait for God's appearance on Mt. Sinai, and Jesus calls on the disciples to prepare in Jerusalem and to wait for the coming of the Spirit.

At Sinai, there were powerful signs in the natural realm, such as thunder and lightning, a dense cloud, thick smoke, and a long blast from a ram's horn. We're told that smoke billowed out into the sky like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain shook violently (cf. Ex. 19:16-20).

And at Pentecost, the text says that there was the sound of a rushing mighty wind, and the presence of flames of fire descending on those present.

And so on Sinai God gave the people his law on tablets of stone. But on Pentecost, Ezekiel's prophecy is fulfilled, and God puts his Spirit into the people's hearts.

At Sinai, God's covenant community -- Israel -- was born. And at Pentecost, the Church -- *the new Israel of God* -- is born, as the Spirit blows onto the scene and into hearts and lives.

So here, in a nutshell, is what is happening on the day of Pentecost. Jewish persons from all over the Roman Empire are gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the first fruits of the harvest as well as the completion of the harvest. They are gathered to celebrate God's giving of the Law and making them his covenant people on Sinai.

And with signs and wonders very reminiscent of Sinai, the Spirit of God descends on these people in this house in Jerusalem. In this earth shaking event, Peter and the others begin to realize that **the harvesting of God's family is underway and that it includes people from all walks of life, not just a select few.**

Red, yellow, black and white; rich and poor; educated and uneducated; professionals and blue collar workers; young and old; male and female; Jew and gentile -- the promise is for *all* and the Spirit is poured out upon *all*.

And the result is that the Church is born, and launches into its ministry of continuing Jesus' presence in the world. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, *the church* is now Jesus' hands, his feet, and his voice.

And so on this day which recalls the thunder and lightning and earthquake and smoke on Mt. Sinai, this day where the children of Israel were made the people of God and received God's law on tablets of stone; this day which celebrates the writing of God's law on the hearts of people by the gift of the Holy Spirit; let us open our hearts afresh and anew to the movement of the Spirit in our own lives and in this place.

Let us come again to the Lord's Table, seeking and receiving grace to help us as we carry on Christ's important work in the world.

And let us give thanks that the gift of God's Spirit is not just for a select few, but for ALL of us who with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him.

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