

## PENTECOST -- A BAPTISM OF WIND AND FIRE

(5/20/18)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 3:11-12  
Acts 2:1-4

*“He [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:11-12)*

Today is Pentecost, the day we celebrate as the birthday of the Christian church! Because it is one of the great celebrations of the Christian year, the liturgical color is red. Red is reserved for special occasions such as ordinations, installations, Reformation Sunday, and Pentecost.

Pentecost is a special day in our church year.

The word *pentecost* in Greek, the original written language of the New Testament, means “fiftieth.” It is a religious observance that has roots in the Old Testament and is observed in both Judaism and Christianity. We Christians celebrate Pentecost fifty days after Easter.

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the customary name for this observance is the Feast or Festival of Weeks. It is the second of three obligatory observances, the other two being Passover and Tabernacles. In Exodus 34:22, it is defined as the festival of “the first fruits of wheat harvest.” These passages indicate that the Feast of Weeks was originally an agricultural festival, an occasion to show gratitude to God for the first fruits, for the early harvest of wheat.

According to Old Testament regulations, one was not allowed to work on the day of Pentecost. The people were required to make sacrifices of various animals and of bread made from the newly harvested grain.

Pentecost eventually began to lose its association with agriculture and came increasingly to be associated with the religious history of the Hebrew people. It was identified with the covenant that God made with Noah, and later became an observance of the giving of Torah, the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. The fifty days was then taken to be the interval between the Passover, the Exodus from Egypt, and the arrival of the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

The New Testament indicates that first century Christians observed or celebrated Pentecost. In his first letter to the church at Corinth (1Cor.16:8), Paul tells the Corinthians that he plans to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost. Paul does not make any other explicit references to

Pentecost, but in Romans 11:16 he appears to have this observance in mind when he speaks of offering a lump of dough as first fruits.

This morning I would like us to reflect on the meaning of Pentecost in light of the symbolism of wheat and the elements of fire and wind as marks of the Holy Spirit.

In our scripture lesson this morning, John the Baptist states that he is not the Christ; rather, he has come to prepare the way for the Christ. He says that he baptizes with water for repentance, but the one who comes after him, the one whose sandals he is not worthy to carry, will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

John then elaborates on the metaphor of the wheat and the chaff. He says of Jesus, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The metaphor of the wheat and the chaff is a powerful theme in our religious tradition. Pentecost calls our attention to the effect of the fire and the wind of the Holy Spirit on the wheat and chaff of our lives. The fire and the wind are ways in which God separates the wheat from the chaff.

Wheat is symbolic of our life, our conscious life, and our spiritual journey. In John 12:24, Jesus tells us:

*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

This is the message of the resurrection. We need to die to our old selves to be reborn to the new. We need to die to our ego-centeredness, our desire for control and power if we are to find our true center in God. The Christian spiritual journey is not a process of slow and steady growth, ever onward and upward, nor is it a matter of accumulating knowledge or merit from good works. It is a process of death and rebirth.

According to the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is experienced as a rushing wind. Wind is like the breath of God. It is *pneuma*, spirit. It moves and quickens. In the words of the hymn by Edwin Hatch, *Breathe on Me, Breath of God*, we ask God to breathe on us, to give us new life, just as he breathed life into Adam and Eve.

Wind was an important part of the harvest that was celebrated at the festival of Pentecost. The wheat was struck on the floor to separate it from the husks, the chaff. When the harvester

threw the mixture into the air with a winnowing fork, the heavier wheat would fall back to the granary floor. The lighter chaff, the useless shell, would blow away in the wind.

Wind helps us to separate the wheat from the chaff. The Holy Spirit, like a rushing wind, can help us to distinguish the valuable from the worthless in our life. It can help us determine what we need to keep and what we need to throw away.

Scripture tells us that God's judgment comes upon us like a mighty wind. In Jeremiah 13:24, God says to those who have been unfaithful to his covenant:

*I will scatter you like chaff  
driven by the wind from the desert.*

In Luke 22:31, Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him three times before the cock crows. He then says to Peter,

*Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*

This is exactly what happened. As a result of his post-resurrection encounters with Jesus and his experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter becomes one of the great leaders of the early church!

After the wind comes the fire. The alchemists referred to the fire as *calcinatio*, an important part of the process of turning the *prima materia* of our psyche, of our life experience into gold. In chemistry, fire is an important part of the process of both testing and transformation. Fire burns away the impurities and leaves the gold behind.

In the words of a 9th century hymn entitled, "Come, Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire," we pray that our lives will be lightened "with celestial fire." In our closing hymn today, which was written by Isaac Watts in 1707, we will sing and pray:

*Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,  
With all Thy quickening powers;  
Kindle a flame of sacred love  
In these cold hearts of ours.*

In one of our favorite nineteenth-century hymns, "Spirit Divine, Attend Our Prayers," Andrew Reed wrote,

*Come as the fire: and purge our hearts  
Like sacrificial flame. . .*

This implies that fire is not only tied to passion, to quickening and to transformation; it is also experienced as cleansing. It has the power to purge our hearts like a sacrificial flame.

In the 3rd chapter of his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul describes the role of fire in separating the valuable from the worthless. Paul says:

*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. . . . Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.*

Paul is describing a baptism by fire. So often in life we are tested or tried by fire. The baptism of fire is a confrontation, a part of the transformation process. The fire, which burns up the chaff in a very intense heat just outside the granary, leaves us with the wheat, the gold of which the alchemists and St. Paul speak.

How can we tell the difference between the wheat and the chaff--in ourselves and in our church? I believe the Holy Spirit helps with this discernment. The Holy Spirit that came upon the apostles on the day of Pentecost brings a baptism of repentance, a baptism, as John predicted, by fire.

I think of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as helping me discern who I am. The Holy Spirit guides me to be myself fully as a child of God. Even more than the Law, the Holy Spirit tells me when I am departing from the path. The Holy Spirit helps me to look at myself through the eyes of God. Only then can I sort out what is valuable from what is worthless in my life.

Several years ago, I was visiting one of our elderly parishioners who was in a nursing home and was experiencing senile dementia. Sometimes she would be in good contact, sometimes not. She didn't always remember who I was. On several occasions she told me that she didn't know who I was, but I was really handsome! One of the members of my family and several members of the Diaconate expressed their opinion that the remark was sure and certain evidence of her dementia. I, of course, prefer to think that she was not only in her right mind but that she was actually seeing deeper and clearer than some of the people who should be more supportive of me, especially bearing in mind that I have low self-esteem.

But that's not the point. That particular day when I walked into the room and sat down next to her she asked me who I was. I said, "Who do you think I am?" She replied, "I don't

know. Sometimes you're my pastor, Paul Sanderson, but sometimes you're not." I remember sitting there thinking that our little exchange might be telling me something about the woman, but it also might be saying something about me.

When am I Paul Sanderson, the Paul Sanderson that God calls me to be, and when am I not? When am I a Christian, a follower of Jesus, and when am I not? When am I a true pastor to my flock, and when am I not? When am I living my life out of my true center, and when am I alienated from it? When are we the First Community Church of Southborough, true to our calling and our mission, and when are we not? God knows. The Holy Spirit, the spark of God within each of us and within this church knows.

The Holy Spirit calls us to a baptism of repentance, a repentance guided by God. It calls us to recognize the times when we are not the person we are meant to be. This is a baptism by fire. It can help us separate the wheat from the chaff in our lives as individuals and as a church.

There is a story of a little girl from Connecticut who had been learning the Lord's Prayer in Sunday school. When she was called upon to recite it, she said:

*Our Father, who art in New Haven, how did you know my name?*

People who graduated from Yale University like this little anecdote. The point is that God, that God who is here in Southborough as well as New Haven, does know us by name. God knows us, knows who we are with all our faults. God comes to us in the form of the Holy Spirit to help us discern who we are, to separate the wheat from the chaff. Pentecost reminds us of this truth.

May the Holy Spirit, with all its wind and fire, be with us as individuals and with us as a church this Pentecost and throughout the days to come, helping us to discern not only who we are but also who God wants us and calls us to be.

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