



The Message
June 4th 2022
The Feast of Pentecost

The Rev. Michael Burke
St. Mary's Episcopal Church

Good morning! On this Holy Day of Pentecost.

Pentecost is the major Feast Day of the Christian year, in which we live into the Spirit of those events recounted in the Book of Acts, whereupon the disciples, "gathered together in one place," were visited by the Holy Spirit, and immediately experienced the power of God made manifest in their midst. Because it is the power of that Holy Spirit at work which calls out and calls forth our shared ministry together in Jesus' name, Pentecost is often called the "birthday of the Church."

I look forward to Pentecost each year

As I have been noticing that the last few sermons from me have been on some heavy topics, today I thought that I might intentionally share something lighter.

I have such great memories of Pentecost past.

In 1998, Nancy and I were living in Braddock Bay, on the southern shore of Lake Ontario in Western New York. Lake Ontario is the smallest of the Great Lakes, but still the 14th largest body of fresh water in the world, and would build up some impressive storms. We would sit there, on the shore, and watch storms come across the lake. It could be 85 degrees and the air perfectly still on shore, while out in the middle of the lake a full-on lightning storm could be raging, sending huge breaking waves toward the shore. Sometimes, as storms came closer to shore, we could see a waterspout rising tens of feet into the air, as a vortex of wind swirled the surface of the lake upward like a small tornado.

I was Rector of St. George's Episcopal Church at the time, located just one mile inland from the lake. It was situated right out in the middle of an old commercial pumpkin farm, with not a single tree or hill to protect it from any oncoming storms.

The only space around the church that wasn't completely flat, was at the South end of the building, where the congregation had excavated a large hole with sloping grassy sides, the future site of the new foundation of the next phase in our building plan, which was going to be a Christian Education wing.

Until then, the children's Sunday school classes and the nursery were all crammed into church basement, which opened up through two emergency doors into this big open pit.

And so on that particular Pentecost day, we "were all together in one place" at St. George's. As families were coming into the Church for the Sunday service, many dressed in red in celebration of the day, it was bright, sunny, and the air was still. The service progressed as it normally did, with children's talk, hymns, and the Scripture readings. And then I got up to preach. The fun thing about preaching at St. Georges was that anything could happen, and usually did. (I've mellowed considerably since those years, believe it or not.).

And so I'm telling the story of that powerful day of Pentecost recounted in the 2nd Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. How the festival of Pentecost was, in biblical times, celebrated as *Hag HaKatzir* (The Feast of Harvest – in Hebrew חג השבועות *Hag haShavuot* or *Shevuot*, literally "Festival of Weeks"), located fifty days after the Feast of the Passover, and was the culmination of a period of preparation and rededication to God's work.

And as I was doing this, I noticed that Richard, our Senior Warden, was glancing out the side window every few minutes. Richard always walked around during the service, seated latecomers, and generally making sure that everything was running smoothly. I noticed that after once of his looks out the windows, he looked up, caught my eye, and raised his eyebrows. Hmm, I wondered, what did that mean?

And so I continued on. I recounted the experiences the disciples had been through together, the rebuilding of trust after they had scattered on Good Friday, the grief, the shattering loss, the healing and the coming back together. I talked about the eyewitness testimonies of the mysterious post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, him appearing to them in a form in which they did not at first recognize him. I talked of Jesus' presence made known to them in the prayers and in the breaking of the bread.

I told how the women of the group had been using the "upper room" as a location for prayers, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, and the other disciples.¹ And they had been praying that they would all be of one mind and spirit.

Richard looked up at me again, and again, I couldn't read what he wanted. A word about Richard: he was in his eighties, a very tall man, well over six feet, a gentle giant, an old Norwegian farmer, and a former widower who was dragged into The Episcopal Church by his second wife, Gail. He was a man with huge hands, and a quiet man of very few words. He was a devoted disciple of Jesus, and that man would walk through fire and back again if he felt the Lord was calling him to do so. A lifelong Lutheran, he was nonetheless a mentor to this newly ordained Episcopal priest, and I learned much from him. One

thing he repeatedly said - how he never understood how Episcopal clergy, in his experience, could make something as vital and life-changing as the Word of God, seem dull, academic, and dispassionate. He was always telling me, "Michael, what you do is fine, but you need to preach it like your life depends upon it, because it does. We are sustained by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

And so I looked back at Richard that Pentecost morning, caught his eye, and I took it up a notch. And in a couple minutes, I was running at full speed. We were talking about the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and I was sharing stories of how people in that congregation had their lives upturned and changed by the power of God, working through everyday events and circumstances. I spoke in rising tones of life-changing experiences, that both myself and members of the congregation had witnessed first-hand.

And then I turned back to the verses of the Book of Acts:

"Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." (Acts 2: 2-4).

The whole congregation was now sitting up and looking forward. And then, from the side, **it hit us**. First came a loud rustle, as the wind caught the side of the brick building at an angle, and rattled all the side windows, shaking each one in turn. We all turned to look. And then, BAM!, five of the six side windows blew out, sending the storm screens hurtling down the row of chairs. Gusts of wind crashed through, catapulting the screens end over end, blowing every piece of paper, every bulletin, every insert, every songsheet high into the air over our heads, swirling around.

People screamed, and scrambled to get out the way of the torrents of incoming rain, the tumbling screens, and the cyclone of wet, airborne paper. I wasn't sure quite what to do, but since we were at the very apex of the story, I kept right on preaching!

In the Book of Acts tongues of fire were now coming down from above upon the disciples, people were all talking at once in any number of languages. In the congregation people were screaming, not in a fearful way, but like we all do when we are on a roller coaster. Things were flying, and people were getting soaked, and chairs were being knocked over and everyone trying to get out the way.

And I just kept on preaching!

Quite frankly, the audio visual effects were stunning, and it was all just perfectly put together.

And then, a huge “CRACK!”, and a thundering BOOM! - and all of the lights went out at once, leaving us in the half darkness of the Sanctuary. Everyone got real quiet, but only for about a count of six seconds, 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6when a new tidal wave of high-pitched screams came roaring into the Sanctuary. Because when the thunder and lightning hit, the skies opened up with buckets, and buckets of water in a huge deluge just dumped down from the heavens.

Remember the open pit with the grassy sides, where the new foundation was to be? It acted like a great collecting tub, with all the downpour of water rushing into it, and the grassy sides funneled all that water right towards the two emergency doors, which opened into the basement classrooms. All the Sunday School teachers knew was that one moment they were all coloring children’s worksheets, drawing flames of red and yellow with crayons and markers over the disciples heads, and the next second, all the lights went out in the basement, leaving them in absolute darkness, while a two inch wave of water rushed over the floor. Kids screamed, sneakers splashed, as teachers and parent helpers grabbed the kids and headed for the stairwell. All at once, they crashed into the upstairs Sanctuary, babies in arms, wet children by the hand, panicky parents in tow...

And then, just as they came through the doors, all the emergency lights in the building kicked on, powered by the battery systems. And for some reason I’ll never understand, all the Sanctuary emergency lights were pointed directly down into the seating area. All at once , we all went “whoa...” as we shielded our eyes from the sudden transition from near darkness to bright piercing light. It’s like, when the lights went on, everybody stopped what they were doing, and looked up.

And the preacher said, “Whoaa... Awesome!”

And as one, we all burst out laughing! Soaking wet, hair disheveled, the carefully arranged rows of pew chairs all disassembled. We stood there, all laughing. “Amen!” I said. “Amen!” Amen! Amen! We all yelled.

I don’t remember what we did next. I suppose we somehow had communion. I don’t know. What I do remember is that no one rushed home. The sudden storm passed as quickly as it had burst upon us. The Vestry members and our Junior Warden broke out the barbeque grill and set it up under the front awning. Someone made a significant withdrawal from our church supply of apple sausage from the church freezer. And we all had an impromptu church picnic. With tea lights on the tables, flickering with the movement of air that had never stopped moving through the building.

I remember the smiles, and the laughter, and I remember thinking, “The Holy Spirit is here too. In the quiet celebration of life and the enjoyment of one another. Sometimes God’s movement in our lives

comes like a mighty wind, sending everything aloft in a cacophony of disarray, upending all that was perfectly settled in its place, and re-arranging all the rows and chairs.

And sometimes it comes quietly, as things settle out in new and unexpected ways, with a gentle breeze and tea lights.

Who knows how and why such things happens. Sometimes it is enough, just to stand together in one place, lift our eyes, and say... Awesome...

Happy birthday, Church. Happy Birthday, St. Mary's.

ⁱ Traditional interpretation holds that the Descent of the Holy Spirit took place in the Upper Room, or Cenacle, while celebrating the day of Pentecost (Shavuot). The Upper Room was first mentioned in Luke 22:12-13 (*"And he shall show you a large upper room furnished: there make ready. And they went, and found as he had said unto them: and they made ready the passover."*). This Upper Room was to be the location of the Last Supper and the institution of Holy Communion. The next mention of an Upper Room is in Acts 1:13-14, the continuation of the Luke narrative, authored by the same biblical writer.

Here the disciples and women wait and they gave themselves up to constant prayer: *"And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren."*

Then, in Acts 2:1-2, *"And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting."* "They" refers to the aforementioned disciples, and it includes the women. The "place" referring to the same Upper Room where these persons had *"continued with one accord in prayer and supplication"*. (Wikipedia).

Scriptures Appointed for this Day

The Collect

Almighty God, on this day you opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

or this

O God, who on this day taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The First Lesson - Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days it will 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.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' "

The Psalm - Psalm 104:25-35, 37

25 O Lord, how manifold are your works! *
in wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

26 Yonder is the great and wide sea
with its living things too many to number, *
creatures both small and great.

27 There move the ships,
and there is that Leviathan, *
which you have made for the sport of it.

28 All of them look to you *
to give them their food in due season.

29 You give it to them; they gather it; *
you open your hand, and they are filled with good things.

30 You hide your face, and they are terrified; *
you take away their breath,
and they die and return to their dust.

31 You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; *
and so you renew the face of the earth.

32 May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; *
may the Lord rejoice in all his works.

33 He looks at the earth and it trembles; *
he touches the mountains and they smoke.

34 I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; *
I will praise my God while I have my being.

35 May these words of mine please him; *
I will rejoice in the Lord.

37 Bless the Lord, O my soul. *
Hallelujah!

The New Testament - Romans 8:14-17

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

The Gospel - John 14:8-17 (25-27)

Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

["I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."]