

Sermon May 31, 2009

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St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

Good Morning! This is the second year in a row that I've had the honor of preaching on Pentecost Sunday. So hopefully most of you remember the story I told last year of the woman who wandered into an Episcopal church service one morning—somewhere else—not here! Things were proceeding in proper order: hymns, lessons, prayers. But when the priest went to the pulpit the woman came alive. "Yes!" she blurted out when the preacher made a point she thought was particularly apt. "Praise the Lord! Praise his Holy Name!" As she got louder and louder, People began to squirm uncomfortably, so an usher finally walked up to her and whispered, "Excuse me, Ma'am, but is there something wrong?" "Why, no," she said, "I've got the spirit!" At which point the usher replied, "Well, you sure didn't get it here!"

The day of Pentecost is the day when the Church of Jesus Christ came alive through the spirit of God poured out in a new way. Without that we wouldn't be here together this morning.

That was what I was thinking about as I waited in line last Sunday afternoon to do what tourists do, going from Manhattan New York City to Staten Island on the ferry.

There's nothing like being a tourist waiting in line, trying to get my mind beyond the waiting, letting my thoughts go off in different directions. That happened with my experience in the London Underground subway a few months ago. I began thinking about my sermon for a Sunday ahead, and my brain landed on the announcement I kept hearing, "Mind the Gap!" Well, of course that meant the train and the platform, but I began to consider all the gaps in our life experience, and how Christ meets us in those gaps. And that's what I preached about when I got home.

This time I was on a Memorial Day weekend tourist trip I never had done before—taking the Staten Island ferry. Waiting for the boat to leave I'm packed into untold hundreds of people, young and old, black and white, brown and yellow, rich and poor, all shapes and sizes of people choosing to be on that ferry boat on a holiday. What's the big drawing card? Not just because you can see Ellis Island, the gateway to immigration for many decades, or because it's free---the attraction is especially to see the Statue of Liberty, holding up the torch of welcome and freedom for the millions who have made this short roundtrip ride, generation after generation. This is more than just an excursion. It's to ride alongside the symbol of all that the Statue of Liberty represents of freedom and

hope that draws us all from every part of the world to make this trip. As I was waiting, I was mulling over—what makes this experience any different than next Sunday, the day of Pentecost—and worth preaching about?

Now the celebration of Pentecost has arrived and I realize the difference between this and a boat ride to see the Statue of Liberty. Today we celebrate an occasion that drew people of every tongue and nation together not just by a symbol, but by an active living experience of freedom and hope and love that transcends all barriers of time, space, language, gender, and color. Today we celebrate a living spirit that is still at work minding and healing the gaps that have separated us down through the ages. What is the difference between that magnificent statue, so large that the lady of liberty's little finger is eight feet long, holding a bright painted torch that can be seen for miles—and the feast of the Pentecost? One is a symbol, the other—the feast of Pentecost—is an active reality, the Holy Spirit, with a power to change lives. On that first Christian Pentecost The ancient Hebrew festival had become the center stage of God's Holy Spirit revealing all that Jesus Christ is and can be to people of every nation in every time.

"You won't find it here," the usher says? We can't say exactly what happened on this day we now commemorate. But what we unquestionably know is that no matter how it happened, how much of it was enhanced memory decades later, something really huge happened that day. The spirit of God rushed into the lives of a small, not terribly impressive group of people, a group who had been pretty squarely defeated in recent days. It rushed in with such power and transformation that the telling of their story changed the entire world. After that nothing would hold them back again—we never again read of the disciples being fearfully huddled in a small upper room as they were those first few days after Jesus' death. Now they were filled with a new spirit.

Look around you! Maybe you and I don't seem so changed as those people were on the first Pentecost receiving the spirit as if with tongues of fire. But I know from my own life experience and others that the spirit of Pentecost is alive and working in us in a new way, when I hear the shared stories of our lives—when I hear of heartbreaks and tragedies and big disappointments, and even the pesky little ones, of moments that could not be survived without a sense of God's presence—these are moments of Pentecost.

These are moments of Pentecost this morning when we share in the joy of gathering around the baptismal font to baptize a new Christian, to witness in our collective action with water and oil that this child, Philip, is being marked as Christ's own—Christ's very own—forever, and that in Christ we have pledged to be part of a community that makes the world a different reality. Through baptism we are reminded that the Holy Spirit has

always moved upon the troubled waters of this world, that God's spirit of peace, love, harmony, and value, however misty and distant they may seem sometimes, are always hovering over the chaos we sometimes make of our lives.

These are moments of Pentecost that our day school director, Mary Lou English, writes about in the new issue of the Pilgrim, when a four-year-old whose grandfather has just died and looks at her other grandparents and says, "**You're** still growing, aren't you?" Mary Lou writes, "Now more than ever we need to keep on growing. Our previous beliefs about job value and security, money and the economy, and the separation of needs and wants are being challenged daily...there never has been a better time to trust God and seek his guidance in everything we do."

For these moments of Pentecost we need the spirit of God to come anew among us. That's the difference between remembering events like sailing by the statue of Liberty, and coming now into this holy place, at this holy time. The power and presence of the Spirit is here now and has been, **and** we stand in great need of its coming upon us again and again and again—not necessarily with any preconception of what that might look like or call us to do. We need to invite God into our plans, praying as we've never prayed before, for no time is more crucial than this time. And we need to be quiet, because the spirit of God, given who we are, is more likely to be a quiet whisper, rather than a mighty wind—more a deep yearning, a "holy nudge"-- as someone called it-- than tongues of fire.

And now soon we will be asked to join the newly baptized and his parents and sponsors by renewing our own baptismal covenant. Are we ready to say, "WE WILL!?" Recognizing the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and expressing that commitment is the first step to being transformed by it. I pray that we are ready to be changed again by a spirit that never grows old and never stops working!

So come Holy Spirit, Come! AMEN