

Signs and Wonders

Today we celebrate Pentecost – that day when we believe the power of the Holy Spirit came upon the early believers and the church was born. It is a very significant day – the birthday of the church if you will. This week in our house we have celebrated two birthdays and it made me stop and think about why we stop each year to celebrate those milestones. In fact last Sunday on the way to church, I happened to remark that wasn't it funny to think that on June 1 2003 I had driven to church in a sleepy little town in North Carolina all on my own – and here I was on June 1 2014 driving to church in suburban New Jersey with four children in tow! When we celebrate a birthday I think we celebrate the individual in question but also we stop to think about the ways that life has changed, and been enriched; we can no longer imagine what life would be like without that person.

And so I also began to think of the birthday of the church – Pentecost falls fifty days after Easter – on the Jewish celebration of Shavuot. It was the second great feast in the Jewish calendar after Passover, celebrated as a Harvest Festival, and then a day that the Jews would celebrate the giving of the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Like Passover, it was an important day within the Jewish calendar, to stop and remember what God had done for the people. That first Pentecost no doubt, many of the earliest believers would have been gathering to celebrate Shavuot – they would have gathered to remember that they were God's people and that God loved them. It is into that event that we are told the Holy Spirit was poured and those assembled were then empowered to do the work of Christ.

The words that those first believers spoke were heard by those who had gathered in Jerusalem – they were words of testament to God's mighty works of power. As was true at any time of great celebration, people had gathered from many places and spoke many languages. We are told on that day all could understand the words they believers spoke, all could hear in their own language. People were amazed – people couldn't understand what was going on – and as we are want to do when things don't quite make sense to us; people sought a logical explanation. They said the disciples must have been drunk – even so early in the morning.

Of course we know that when the spirit is on the loose – things do not make sense – there are often no logical explanations. And that is tough. We live in a world where logic and rational thinking are held to the highest regard – yet today's text takes us to a different understanding of the world. That's no ordinary way of living and looking at the world

We are told that, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter begins to preach to the assembled crowd and as he does so, he interprets the events of the morning in light of the prophet Joel. In that text God promised to pour out his spirit on all flesh – empowering people to exercise divine power:

‘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.
¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

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¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

We are told later in Acts that 3000 people were added to the church that day. That was a new members' class to remember for sure!

As I pondered all of this during these last few weeks I began to think it is rather odd that in the liturgical year, Pentecost marks the end of the season of Easter and then we go into the long period of Ordinary time. A time that takes us right up to Advent.

Ordinary time – if truth be told when we think about the church year we probably think that, outside of Easter and Christmas, most Sundays are pretty ordinary! Each week probably seems pretty much like the next – especially as we move into these summer months, it is all so ordinary we might think it is the perfect time to skip a Sunday here and there.

Yet Pentecost seems to me to point to a totally different understanding. The people were amazed because the Holy Spirit came upon them and changed them in radical ways. And I don't believe we gather here today to celebrate Pentecost as a once-upon-a-time event – I believe we are living in Pentecost moments each day.

1. We are meant to live in the power and presence of the Spirit of God. The Spirit's power in our lives gives us the ability to recognize Christ's presence in our world, it empowers us to serve Christ in ways that go far beyond our own imagining, it helps to bind us together as a body of God's people.

That's no ordinary way of living and looking at the world. It is a way of seeing and confronting the world that looks with the eyes of the Spirit rather than with the eyes of our own knowledge and understanding. It calls us to see far beyond ourselves and embrace the heart of God for the world. There is nothing ordinary about that.

2. That first Pentecost also reminds us that it was a great equalizing event – all those who were there were able to communicate with one another – there was openness and acceptance and understanding that goes beyond anything that had been seen before. In the world we live in when we are so often at odds with those around us, when we seem to be divided on so many fronts we need the power and gift of the Holy Spirit to unite us. To give us one voice, one mind, one heart. God's.

That's no ordinary way of living and looking at the world. This week two major news stories caught my attention as I thought about these things – first the story of the release of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl. An event that has sparked deep division within the American public as well as the political ranks. A story, like most stories which has many layers and perhaps no easy or neat answers. But a story that reminded me how deeply divided our world sometimes can be and how much we need the power of the Holy Spirit to unite us. One other story that spoke to me this week was the 70th anniversary of Invasion of Normandy. As I watched leaders from around the world gather for those D-Day celebrations it struck me it takes the work of the Holy Spirit to bring healing and hope to

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a world so scarred and broken by war. Who could ever have imagined that 70 years on, the leaders of the enemy nations would stand together, side by side to mourn those whose lives were lost?

Without the power of the Holy Spirit we all can become stuck seeing the world only through our eyes and with our background and understanding.

We need the power of the Holy Spirit to imagine peace and unity and lives of forgiveness and healing. That's no ordinary way of living and looking at the world. It takes the Holy Spirit to give us the courage and the strength to move beyond ourselves – our hurts – our faults and our failings and embrace the other. Even when the other may have harmed us greatly. There is nothing ordinary about that.

3. I believe that Pentecost teaches us that the continued extraordinary movement of the church needs each one of us. When Peter quotes the prophet Joel he reminds the people that the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh – male and female – young and old – free and slave. All of us are claimed and set free by the power of the spirit. It is not reserved for those who are deemed holy enough, smart enough, rich enough. The Holy Spirit is given to all people, at all stages of life, from all walks of life. So often we feel that we are living lives that are of little significance, that we are just ordinary everyday people – and yet Scripture reminds us that is not the case.

Each one of us through the power of the Holy Spirit becomes extraordinary – can achieve extraordinary things for God – and be used in extraordinary ways. That's no ordinary way of living and looking at the world. We are challenged by Pentecost to live into the life that God has in store for us. To imagine the great possibilities for ourselves and for our church and to believe that through God's grace and power, we can achieve those things for his kingdom. There is nothing ordinary about that.

This Pentecost I want to offer us a challenge – let's make this no ordinary summer. Let us be open and aware of the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit around us and within us. Let us begin to look at the world with new eyes. Let us have the courage to dream dreams and see visions of what this extraordinary life of faith is. Pentecost celebrates the birthday of the church – but we still live in that moment. Pentecost moments. This summer I want us to embrace the extraordinary – each week as you open yourself up to the working of the spirit I invite you to take note of your Pentecost moments – the signs and wonders of God around you. Make a note of them and bring them to worship with you each week. Signed or anonymous I invite you to bring them and place them in the offering plate, we shall post them on a bulletin board and remind each other of the spirit's presence among us. That's no ordinary way of living and looking at the world – let's make this no ordinary summer.