

Happy Birth-Day?

The last couple of weeks have been very windy in the Elk Valley. When I was taking a walk, earlier in the week, there was so much dust and grit blowing around that I needed to come home and remove my contact lenses. They were covered in grit. When I was delivering the Pentecost Porch Drops on Thursday and Friday, there were a few times when my car was getting blown around on the roadway. Thankfully there was no oncoming traffic at the time. It made me wonder if that was what the day of Pentecost was like?

When we read of the day of Pentecost, it is very well drawn.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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. (*Acts 2.1-4, NRSV*)

Could you imagine? Guess what the most frightening part of that passage is for me? It's not that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...I think that would be pretty amazing. It's not that the divided tongues of fire appeared and landed on them. Nope. It's the crowd. "They were all together in one place".

Have any of you ever been in a large crowd that turned into a mob? I was at a Take Back the Night March many years ago when I was an Undergraduate in Sudbury, Ontario. We were to gather at a downtown park and then walk through the downtown and break off at the police station parking lot, which was also downtown. There was a group of men who were angry with the idea that women didn't feel safe, so instead of joining the march, they met the group and wanted us to disperse. It was a terrifying moment, as I was fairly close to the front of the group. Keep in mind, there were about one hundred women and we were met with a crowd of about one hundred men. Eventually the police dispersed the men and the women were told to end the march.

Some women were furious as they saw this as the police taking sides with the male protestors. Sensing that things were about to get out of control, I left the march, as did about 75 other women. I have not attended a Take Back the Night March since. And as I walked to where my car was parked, I felt the most frightened I have ever been.

Crowds terrify me. Don't get me wrong, I can preach to the multitudes. I have addressed crowds in the hundreds and not broken a sweat. But if you tell me to go and make small talk in the midst of the gathering -- well, I'd rather do my own dental work than do that.

For some people, a crowd gathering would be energizing and exciting. But not this person.

So, stepping well outside my comfort zone, let's take a closer look at the happenings here on this day.

Jesus departed from his friends roughly ten days before, on what was to become known as the day of Ascension. Jesus had been crucified, died and rose from the dead. He gathered his apostles together, they replaced Judas with Matthias, after drawing lots, and Jesus taught them what he needed them to do, once he left them again.

He has ascended and promised that the Holy Spirit would be returning to them. Please remember that the Holy Spirit has been around since the very beginning of time. The Hebrew word "ruah" - Spirit, Breath, or Wind of God began the entire creation story.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.
(*Genesis 1.1-2, NRSV*)

There's a misunderstanding that the Holy Spirit is a New Testament entity. That the Spirit is the youngest of the Holy Trinity. Not so.

The Story of Pentecost is the other side of the tale of the Tower of Babel. Genesis 11 tells us the story; "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words." (*Genesis 11.1, NRSV*) A quick paraphrase. The people gathering from every corner of the known lands wanted to build a tower so they could chat with God whenever the mood overtook them. God asked them not to. They thought they knew better, so they started building. God, again, asked them not to build the tower. Again, they thought they knew better as the tower was getting taller and taller. So God pushed over the tower and with it the people who had been gathering, now scattered to every corner of the known lands, each now with their own unique language.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit arrives, or rather, returns, in a great rush of wind and those gathered in one place see great tongues, as of fire descending on each of them. Several generations have passed since the Tower of Babel and there are multiple people speaking multiple languages.

We are told there are:

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?’ (*Acts 2.8-12, NRSV*)

This is like Google translate, before Google translate!

And of course, human beings being, well, human, there are the scoffers who think the crowd is drunk. Peter tries to correct the false assumption, assuring them that “they” are not drunk as it is only 9:00 a.m.

Keep in mind that the Day of Pentecost took place during Shavuot or the Festival of Weeks, in which it was believed the Son of God would rise from the dead and would bring with him the Holy Spirit to remain with the faithful.

I am increasingly saddened with the continuing hostilities happening in Jerusalem, between Palestinian and Israeli forces. There has been hostility between Jews and Arabs as well as between Israeli’s and Palestinians and Jews and Muslims. I pray there was a way to end the conflict and for a Pentecost-like moment to occur when tongues of flame, as of fire, would come and rest on the soldiers and more so, on the commanders. That the two sides would focus on what they have in common first, rather than holding onto a centuries of hatred that began and continues with ownership over a piece of land.

My prayer is that the “ruah” (Hebrew), “ru-hwan” (Arabic) would envelop the people of Jerusalem with God’s love, peace and tolerance, and help them find the way forward to recognition and reconciliation.

The birth-day of the Church began in chaos. The post-modern Church remains in chaos, yet a different kind of chaos. We are told, increasingly, that there is no need for “organized religion” in the world. When it comes to those who are militant and unrelenting, I agree that there is no need for these kinds of sweeping judgments and intolerances. Rules that are about order, instead of people.

If we are to embody what Jesus represented, we must set down weapons of intolerance and indifference. We must pick up the fabric of understanding and questioning. We must learn from each other. And the most important piece of this, at the very heart of what Jesus’ teachings are about, is relationship.

If we are in a relationship with each other, it means we will listen to the other. It doesn’t mean we will hold hands and sing Kumbya, and that all will be well with the world. I am not that naive. And yet, if I am in a relationship with you; then what is important to you becomes important to me. I want to understand why that particular thing is important to you. And hopefully, in our dialogue, we can learn from each other.

Jesus was never about the societal rules of race, status, and exclusion. He was interested in the moral rules of inclusion which came from a place of love. A deep, abiding, unconditional love.

Politics and religion aside, geography and history paused; what we need now, more than ever, is a desire to listen, to learn, and to love.

What a wonderful birth-day for the Church that would be. Alleluia!

Pentecost - 23 May 2021

Acts 2.1-21

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