

When the Spirit Comes - 6

Pentecost Sunday
Aldersgate Sunday
Memorial Day Sunday
May 27, 2012
Acts 2:1-24, 36-41

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our readings this morning move from the waiting period between Easter and Pentecost, to Pentecost itself. The Jewish Feast of Weeks was celebrated as the first wheat harvest seven weeks after Passover, or more accurately from the day of First Fruits, the first day of the week following Passover. Pentecost is the Greek term, meaning 50 days.

Acts 2: When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.² 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.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?"⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ "In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹ And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

²² "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Will you pray with me...

This Memorial Day Sunday we can understandably get sentimental about the men and women who have given their lives for our country, our Jerusalem and Judea. This is also Aldersgate Sunday, the day when John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Movement, had his heart warming experience and came to a personal faith in Christ. And we could get nostalgic about Wesley, our heritage in Jerusalem and Judea. But for us as Christians it is first and foremost of all Pentecost Sunday, when the Spirit came to empower the disciples as witnesses for Jesus Christ.

For the past six weeks we have been in a holding pattern with the disciples, that 50 day waiting period between Easter and Pentecost. It was at the 40th day that Jesus ascended to heaven, so for the next ten days the disciples were expectantly waiting for the fulfillment of Jesus' words when he said "When the Spirit comes you will receive **power** to be my **witnesses** in **Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**"

We've talked about the resource – the **power** of the Holy Spirit, and power being the alignment and application of energy to accomplish work, or a purpose.

We've talked about the purpose, the work, indicated by Jesus which was to **be his witnesses** – to bear testimony to the living reality of Jesus, crucified and risen, through our words and deeds.

And we talked about the direction. For work and purpose to be accomplished the applied energy has to have a direction. Followers of Jesus begin to bear witness in Jerusalem, in the center of our faith community, and move out into witnessing in the Judea of our family, friends and associates. The direction is out, away from where we are starting, to where God is sending us.

When Molly Hardman (or any runner) runs a race she starts at the starting line, but she doesn't stay there. There is a direction, away from where she starts. Even if the finish line is back at the starting line, the purpose, the work of the race, cannot be accomplished by just stepping back three paces to cross the finish line... the course must be completed before the line is crossed.

Long distance runners often say that in every race there is an invisible wall – that point at which their bodies reach a breaking point, thinking they cannot go on and want to quit. However, their consistent testimony is that after getting through the wall there is a new confidence and determination that the work, the purpose, can be accomplished.

Last week, we confronted the wall, the barrier of our task as witnesses – as we explored Jesus' next step of crossing the boundaries to bear witness in the Samaria of unfamiliar persons and customs. I will be the first to admit I am uncomfortable in Samaria, but the more time I spend there and the more often I go there, the less fearful I become and the more I feel a connection to persons who may be very different from the gentle, cultured folks of my Judea. The more often I

go to Samaria, the more time I spend with the people there, the easier it becomes to recognize that these people are also precious to God.

In a conversation last week another pastor said that someone in his congregation had asked him if he believed a gay person could be a Christian. The pastor replied "Let me ask you if you believe an adulterer can be a Christian?"

How about a liar, or someone who fudges on their tax return, or someone who does not honor their parents, or a white collar thief? I believe that the only ones who can be Christians are those for whom Jesus was willing die – sinners in need of a savior. We are all sinners saved by grace.

Most of us can accept the fact that a murderer might repent accept Christ and become a Christian, but what about a pedophile? What about clergy, politicians, or educators who have used their position to take advantage of others, either sexually, emotionally, or financially? Can they be Christians?

I personally don't have any problem in accepting that a Jew can accept Jesus as Savior and consider themselves both a Jew and a Christian. But for some reason I am less certain that a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or any other faith system, can accept Christ as savior and still retain a connection to their cultural identity. They are Samaritans to me.

They might be Samaritans to us, but we regularly rub shoulders with Samaritans in Judea, and sometimes even in Jerusalem. Samaria is the boundary, the invisible wall, the edge of our comfort zone, that once we break through the wall, cross the boundary, we gain confidence and determination that the ends of the earth is just the finish line for our work as witness for Jesus Christ.

Many of us remember the story of John Stephen Akhwari the marathon runner from Tanzania in the 1968 Olympic Games. He fell, badly cutting and dislocating his knee. The sun had set, there were only a few thousand people left in the stadium, the first place finisher had come an hour and five minutes earlier, but as Akhwari crossed the finish line, dead last, the crowd cheered. 75 had started the race, 57 completed it. When he was interviewed later and asked why he continued running and didn't drop out he said "My country did not send me 10,000 miles just to start the race; they sent me to finish the race."

The Holy Spirit comes to empower us to be witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Jesus doesn't send us to just start the race, witnessing in Jerusalem, but to finish it, witnessing to the ends of the earth.

On that first Pentecost Sunday Jews had come to Jerusalem for Sukkoth, the Feast of Weeks, defined as a week of weeks, for the traditional celebration of bringing the first tenth of the wheat harvest, the tithe, to the Temple in Jerusalem. Gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks were people from the known ends of the earth. And when the Spirit came, they heard the disciples' bold and confident witness, that Jesus, who had been crucified, dead and buried, was in fact alive, had appeared to various people in various places over a period 40 days, and 10 days ago had ascended to heaven.

Gathered from at least 17 regions of the Roman Empire, with their own various languages, each person heard the witness of the disciples in their own native language. And three thousand became baptized believers that day, from all corners of the know world. I am struck by the fact that the witness to the ends of the earth first occurred as people from the ends of the earth had come together, right there in Jerusalem.

We don't have to think too hard realize that 'the ends of the earth' meant the same thing to the disciples as it does to us. While Jerusalem represented their faith community, and Judea represented their community of family, friends, and associates, Samaria represented folks 'right next door' who had different backgrounds and culture; folks with whom they would naturally, normally, culturally and traditionally choose not to associate. But the ends of the earth... that's just the ends of the earth.

As part of the United Methodist Church, our witness does reach the ends of the earth through missions of medical relief, church planting, leadership and pastoral training in Africa, Ukraine, Central and South America, Caribbean and Pacific Islands, Europe and Asia, even Australia. For most of us our participation in that witness is primarily through the financial support of a portion of our offerings.

Every year as we come to Annual Conference we have a special opportunity to support the mission of Christ both in Florida and in Angola, through our partnership with the Methodist Church in that country. Next week I will be designating any communion offering left

at the rail to be directed to that Annual Conference offering, as we witness to the ends of the earth.

But another, just as important, way of participating in witness for Christ is through prayer as we open our hearts to be filled with God's love for men and women, boys and girls, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. At the top of the weekly prayer list we intentionally include names of countries from the ecumenical prayer cycle. It is easy to become focused on the needs and concerns in our Jerusalem, and Judea. It is important to also remember our witness to Samaria and the ends of the earth.

This Memorial Day Sunday and Aldersgate Sunday, but as Christians it is first and foremost of all Pentecost Sunday, a celebration of when the Spirit came to the first disciples.

And when the Spirit comes we receive **power** to be his **witnesses** in **Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**"