

Birth of the Church

Cycle # 3 – Session #3

Birth of the Church

Text: Acts 2:1-18

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle. At Pentecost the people saw the presence of God like tongues flame. Flame not only represents the mystery of God among us, it is also the symbol of God's power and the empowering of God's people. God is with us.

Song: Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise -- #66 Chalice Hymnal

Litany

Come to praise God, all you faithful people!
Come, for God welcomes us and offers to draw close
Praise to God, who rules over all the earth.
Praise to God, who is as near as our next breath.
Sun and moon and stars shine in praise to God.
God created them and established for each a place.
God has a place for us in this world;
We have come that God may instruct and equip us.
Mountains and hills, trees and animals praise God.
Let all the rulers of the earth do so as well.
God provides abundantly for our needs.
God makes of one family all who dwell on earth.

Welcome One Another. Share briefly with one another the worst thing and the best thing that happened to you this week. Was there something in particular which you experienced as drawing you toward God?

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Scripture

Text: Acts 2:1-18

A Sound Like a Strong Wind

¹⁻⁴ When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

⁵⁻¹¹ There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites;
Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia,
Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,
Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene;
Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes;
Even Cretans and Arabs!

"They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!"

¹² Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: "What's going on here?"

¹³ Others joked, "They're drunk on cheap wine."

Peter Speaks Up

¹⁴⁻¹⁸ That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk—it's only nine o'clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen:

"In the Last Days," God says,
"I will pour out my Spirit
on every kind of people:
Your sons will prophesy,
also your daughters;
Your young men will see visions,
your old men dream dreams.
When the time comes,
I'll pour out my Spirit
On those who serve me, men and women both,
and they'll prophesy.

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and
where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

As we begin our journey first behind and then through this text, I invite you to begin in a very personal place, with the text and your own experience. As I tell you a little of my own journey, perhaps it will trigger some thoughts for you about not only the text, but the experience of the early church.

I grew up in a church which tended to take scriptures literally, probably along the lines of what Marcus Borg describes as the *first naiveté*, meaning not a rigid literalism, but an assumed idea that the way the text told it was exactly as it happened. So the only thing I really knew about Pentecost was what little I heard about this text and what I saw in the *Pentecostal Church* in my neighborhood. On warm summer nights we'd gather on a neighbor's front porch which provided a great view through the open doors of the church and watched and listened to people "speaking in tongues" and "being filled by the Spirit." From what I'd heard at church I assumed that what was happening in that church was what happened on that first Pentecost. Right off, I knew if that were the case, I'd just as soon continue being a member of my "spiritless" church where people sang great hymns of praise, and worship was an orderly thing. I was grateful the church had been born, but I also hoped there would be no repetition of those first events.

It was many years before I came back to this text and began to discover its value. There were three things which led to revaluing of a text I'd discarded.

- 1) More contemporary translations made it clear that they spoke in other languages, rather than in "glossolalia," usually referred to as 'speaking *in tongues*'. People understood what they were hearing because they were hearing the Good News in their own languages.
- 2) I discovered that Pentecost is a harvest feast which occurred every year, and had no connection to the Resurrection. It fell according to the Jewish calendar. It also strikes me as a very appropriate festival to serve as the time and place of the birth of the church.
- 3) I discovered that Pentecost is the essential completion of Easter. Jesus' life and death took on meaning because of the resurrection, but even that wouldn't have been enough to bring the new church into being, if there had never been a point at which the story of the Good News broke out and people began to hear the story and experience the on-going presence of the Holy Spirit, the one John called the "*paraclete*" or companion.

With these discoveries I was able to go to this story and read it with “fresh eyes” and listen with “fresh ears.”

While your experience with Pentecost may be very different, I suspect my experience may not have been all that unusual up through the 60’s and even into the 70’s. When my husband and I went to serve a small church in Northern California in the late 70’s we went to a church which was in many ways ahead of us when it came to recognizing the value of the church year and using it. It was there we first began to celebrate Pentecost and recognize its place. Even now as I have since been in various churches, some celebrate Pentecost and in some churches Pentecost gets barely a mention.

I suspect one of the reasons I enjoy Bible study is the surprises which seem to accompany it. Acts is one of those books that is clearly more than it purports to be. At the beginning of the book we are told 1) It is a continuation of the story begun in the Gospel of Luke. 2) It is being told by the same person who wrote Luke’s gospel. 3) It begins almost conversationally as the writer sets the story down for his friend, Theophilus. Lying underneath its prose is an amazing story of the young church’s birth and growth moving from Israel out into the Roman Empire.

Acts is a book which deserves to be read many different ways. It has often been read as history and provides us with the little we know about the beginnings of the church. While it rarely lays out the disagreements and variations among the many congregations and understanding of who Jesus was and is, there are hints which let us know that even the early church was more complex than has sometimes been thought. Some 18th and 19th century Christians believed Acts would provide a pattern for the church and if we could get back to that pattern, we would in fact become a New Testament Church. Disciples have their roots in that movement, but there were others who also came out of that understanding. Somehow, they apparently didn’t quite understand how many different patterns there were in the Book of Acts.

It may be read as literature or theology or scripture. All of the ways we may go to this book are quite legitimate because all of these elements are present. If you want to explore some of these avenues and become better acquainted with the book, there are excellent articles in the ***New Interpreter’s Bible*** and numerous commentaries. As John said at the end of his Gospel, *“But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”* (Jn 21:25) Many books have been written, still more could be written, exploring every book of scripture to encourage us to keep learning.

There has always been an assumption that the *Book of Acts* was written by Luke who was referred to as a physician and who traveled with Paul during some of his life. And there is no real reason for denying that to be so. At the same time the writer is in many ways hidden behind his writing that whether or not we know his name, whether or not the two books were composed by the same person, does not add a lot to our knowledge or understanding of him. He wrote that others might see and he didn’t sign his name.

There are some basic features about the writer which can be deduced from his writing. He was Greek, well educated, and well traveled. He may have been a convert to Judaism who then converted to Christianity. He may have been an associate of Paul's. His focus is on the story, not on his role in it.

The date of the writing also appears to be somewhat foggy, but there are things that can be seen which point to the late 80's or possibly the early 90's. It was written at a time when it was important to stress the church's Jewish roots. If the church were truly connected to Judaism, then they could claim the same rights from Rome as Judaism did. If they were an entirely new group, then they were not protected and could, or more likely would, be persecuted by Rome. There also appears to be a desire to legitimize the church in the eyes of Jews so that retaining Jewish scriptures and practices was stressed.

Theophilus, the reader to whom the book is addressed may help us discern more about his world. It appears he is a new convert, socially prominent, seeking to know and understand his faith better. His name means, "*Dear to God.*" Chances are Luke had a particular person in mind when he wrote the book. On the other hand it may also be a clever metaphor for each new convert seeking to know and understand the story of Christianity and the Christian faith. It is also quite possible Luke wrote with a particular person in mind, but the book simply offered the same benefit to every new and "dear to God" believer. (NIB, Vol X, 7) It occurs to me with that address, we also are included even though we live more than 20 centuries later.

While on the surface the book purports to be a simple account of what happened as the young church grew, there are also other layers worth considering. I suspect God worked in the first century in much the same way God works in this century, through the hearts and minds of people. So while we may think we are doing something for a clear simple reason, and we are, we may also be doing something that is filled with other possibilities. What we may see from one perspective, God may use many ways. Whether or not Luke intended the Book of Acts to be used in all the ways it is used, doesn't really matter. Once it was written, it belonged to God, to the readers, and all the generations which have followed.

It may be a peace making document in which Luke's peace seeking spirit sought to bring the many different faith groups together as one church. He was also an ecumenist in the best sense of the word who never forgot the practical aspects of carrying the good news into a diverse world where it was essential people receive the good news not only in words they could understand, but in ways they could follow. It may have been an argument against idolatry and an "apology" for the faith as it stresses the authority and importance of traditions for the church that is yet to be. He particularly makes the argument for Paul's authority. It is probably impossible in any age to separate what is happening in the political world from the world of faith, so of course some of that enters our story and we receive some of that as we encounter the world of the Roman Empire and the life of Christians and the young church. It also has served as a tool for the evangelistic mission of the church as it carried the Gospel to the farthest corners of the empire. Last of all it appears to have been written with pastoral concern to encourage new believers such as Theophilus in strengthening their faith.

It appears that God takes whatever crumbs we offer and turns them into feast. The richness of the feast seems to grow as we continue to explore the scriptures. With that in mind, I invite you to explore the small, but mighty text at the beginning of Acts 2.

This is a good place to pause and read the story of Pentecost again. Even if you've already read it, listen to it again and see the scene in your mind's eye.

Observation

The stage for the events at Pentecost has been set in Chapter 1. Have you noticed how many times the number *Forty* appears in scripture? The Israelites wandered for 40 days. Elijah's journey to Mt Horeb was 40 days and nights. After Jesus' baptism he was driven into the wilderness for a period of 40 days and forty nights. In the account at the beginning of Acts Jesus has been among the followers for 40 days, during which time they have recognized he is alive. Before his ascension he tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the "baptism of the Holy Spirit." After his ascension into heaven as the followers are still trying to see him, two men, dressed all in white appear and say to them, (loosely translated) "*Stop gawking! Jesus has been taken up into heaven and just as you've seen him go, he'll come back.*" Since there really wasn't anything else to do they went back to Jerusalem and spent the time in prayer.

Jesus' resurrection is a central theme throughout the Book of Acts beginning with an assurance of his resurrected presence among the followers, a long enough period of time to show the resurrection wasn't imagination or just a happenstance. The witness of the Gospels and Acts is to the reality of the living presence and affirms he is Lord and Christ. Once he leaves them, the disciples do as they are told, return to the city and wait for what is to come next. Jerusalem is the Holy City, the place where Jesus met his destiny, the place from which he finally departs and the place from which his followers will move out to carry the Good News to the farthest ends of the earth.

Consider

What does the witness say to you? If you were to put yourself in the place of the waiting disciples what might that wait be like?

Observation

The word Pentecost means "the fiftieth day". It was a term used by the Jews of the Diaspora for a day long harvest festival which is described more commonly as the "Feast of Weeks." It took place fifty days after Passover. While Luke is the only one who tells this story and it seems to be only loosely connected to other references to the Holy Spirit, it has become a central story for the church as an event when the community experienced the outpouring of the spirit which sent them out into the world. It is apparently a tradition on which Luke drew as he began the narration of the continuing presence and transformation of God's people.

Pentecost was one of the “pilgrim” festivals when people came to Jerusalem and the entire household of Israel gathers to celebrate God’s goodness. While there are lots of possibilities for how the event of Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit can be compared to the giving of the law at Mount Horeb, that may be stretching things a bit far. In fact seeing the connection may be one of those times something appears clearer in retrospect than it did at the time of the events. It does make some sense to suggest that the connection lies more in the similarity of the events. Just as God gave the law to the Israelites to guide them, God sends the Holy Spirit to guide those who have experienced Jesus as God made visible and have chosen to follow him. Heaven breaking into human affairs lies at the heart of Luke’s narrative. With Jesus, birth, history changed.

Consider

While you may want to spend some time in reflecting on how God has broken into the world at various periods of time, particularly in the events that led to Pentecost and even at Pentecost, you may also want to spend some time considering where God has broken into your life and the life of your congregation. One of Luke’s points is that just as God had broken into history in the past, God broke into the world in a new way at Pentecost, and God continues to break into human history. Pentecost pointed the community toward the future and the ongoing presence of God.

Observation

Describing dramatic events is always challenging. Words compared to the reality never seem adequate. Luke in creating the picture of Pentecost for all those who would read and follow in the years after that great blessing of the spirit, would never have the opportunity to see or experience it in the same way the first followers did. Luke describes the coming as being like the sound of a violent wind, perhaps like a whirlwind, coming through, clearing away what had been there before and being like “tongues of fire.” This, I suspect, has been one of the places this story seems like it happened long ago and far away and it’s hard to bring it into the present. My internal skeptic looks at it and wants to know, *“What really happened? Did people actually see flames and if they did, what kept them from going into a panic? Or is what happened a miracle because God entered into the ordinary and transformed it?”*

Living in India was for me a door to the time of Jesus. I saw many of the tools which the people of India currently use that are almost unchanged since ancient times and match pictures of artifacts from the time of Jesus. I experienced a different world, one in which some of the things that in scripture seem very strange, seem less strange. That people heard the message in their own tongues is on the one hand an amazing account. On the other hand, what is to make us think that among the earlier followers which numbered many people beyond the Twelve, there were not people who spoke many other languages. I suspect that people were exposed to other cultures and languages perhaps more than we have thought possible from this distance in looking back. Israel sat on the trade routes of the ancient world. Whenever armies went to war they marched back and forth. Trade people journeyed through. There were more mixtures of people than is usually suggested. Even the Galileans who were relatively

uneducated were in all likelihood exposed to other languages and culture. I learned in India that people who didn't think there was a problem in learning other languages mostly didn't have a problem learning another language. If they wanted to be able to talk to someone from another area or they went to spend a few days away from their village or home place, they would pick up enough to carry on a conversation. They didn't have to be highly educated in order to do that. They simply needed to have something they wanted to say or something they wanted to understand.

My picture of Pentecost is of people who were overwhelmed with the wonder of the good news and the coming of the Holy Spirit, so they just had to tell.

Consider

How does God break into our lives and transform us? When do ordinary everyday events become suffused with the presence of God? Have you ever just had to tell someone something you had experienced?

Observation

The gift of the Spirit was first given to Jews. But there were those among them who didn't get it. Luke calls them "*devout Jews.*" These were people who were devout in their religious practices. They heard the same thing the others heard, the sound of a great wind, Galileans speaking in other languages. The people who had gathered from "all over the world," meaning the known world of that day, had come to celebrate Pentecost because they were faithful Jews. They are all there to hear this news and some of them just don't get it. They are amazed. "*How is it that these illiterate Galileans can be speaking other languages?*" They all know that just isn't possible. Some of them hear and are just perplexed by what they hear. They are ignorant about Jesus being God's Messiah. They have missed that word of confirmation which if they'd been reading their scripture, they might have understood. But they had simply been looking in the wrong direction or didn't understand how Jesus connected with the prophets. So they discount what has happened. "*These people are drunk.*" This leads Peter to interpret the events which led to that day, as well as this event, so they may understand. Some of them do get it and some don't. Those who didn't may have been among those who later led in the persecution of the Christians.

Consider

When you experience something out of the ordinary, how do you react? Are you ready to listen with an open mind, listen with fresh ears, not assume that whatever is going on is simply people being misled and going in a wrong direction? Do you want to get back to the ordinary, the normal? What happens when someone suggests doing something a different way in your congregation? Who are the modern equivalents of "*devout Jews?*" Are you one of them?

Observation

The Holy Spirit is an equal opportunity spirit. Earlier in our story the Apostles were huddled in a back room somewhere, afraid for their lives. Now they are out in the open and have come together with a lot of other followers. When the spirit comes, it doesn't just come on the few, it comes on the many.

Consider

Is it possible there is an important truth here for us? If it is only a handful who are maintaining they have experienced the presence of the spirit and they know what should be done and how to do it, might that be one of the ways of recognizing whether a thing is or isn't truly of God's spirit? While it is true that sometimes the working of the spirit begins among a small group of people, those people are usually aware they don't have a corner on the spirit and that the spirit will be working in numerous ways through other people. Where do you see God's spirit at work in your life and in the lives of others? What's your experience of people who have the "right answers" and try to make others conform?

Observation

As I have experienced this story in the last few years, it has struck me that in many ways it is the story of the *New Tower of Babel*. I don't know whether that story was in Luke's mind or had in some way become connected to the tradition of the story of Pentecost, but to me there seems to be an obvious parallel. It also seems to me it is a connection worth making, even if it was not a part of it from the beginning.

You remember the story? (Genesis 11:1-9) According to the story there had been a time when the "whole earth" had spoken one language. People had no trouble understanding one another. They had all migrated from the east and found a plain in the land of Shinar. Obviously there weren't many people at the time and the place is uncertain. But when they found this ideal place to settle, they decided to build a great city out of bricks. Apparently there were not suitable rocks and other building materials so they had to make them. The plan was to not only build a great city, they planned to build a great hill and on the top of the hill a tower that would reach right up to heaven. Their focus was to "build a name for themselves." After a time, the LORD came down to look at what they were doing. The Lord was concerned that they might begin to think of themselves as equal to God which wouldn't have been right. So God confused their language and all at once they couldn't understand each other and then God scattered them all over the face of the earth. The tower was never completed.

In this story, God un-confuses the language. People, who normally would not have been able to understand each other, were able to understand. While they didn't all speak the same language, they began to have ways to communicate with each other and began to become *one people*. Again, living in India as well as other places has made this clear to me. There is an international community of people who are followers of Christ and therefore brothers and sisters. While my husband and I came from a very

different culture to live and work in India, we found that we shared a common faith which drew us together. The dream of those who led the movement which became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was an end to the divisions between people. The followers of Christ would come together at the Lord's table and would recognize one another as brothers and sisters in the faith. That dream has yet to come true. But living in India where Christians are only a small percentage of the population another Christian's pedigree is not so important. Whether that person came from the Church of St Thomas or the Churches of Northern or Southern India, Catholics, descendents of groups started by Baptists, Methodists, Church of God, Lutheran, Disciples or any other denomination, these were our brothers and sisters. It was much more important to discover the things we shared, than to focus on differences. There were many ways in which God's spirit was at work among people from diverse backgrounds.

Consider

Where do you see people coming together and being the community of God's people? In your town are there things the churches do together? Are there things you share with other Christians which bind you together even if you are not members of the same church?

Activity (Optional)

Even if it isn't Pentecost when you do this session, you may want to plan a Pentecost celebration for your group or your congregation. Pentecost isn't limited to one time, one place. It comes any time and to any place. The Holy Spirit comes when it will and transforms our lives.

Practicing the Presence

- 1) If I were to choose an alternative title for this week's study, I might call it *"In God's Good Time"* or *"It's Different When God Builds the Tower"* or even *"Transformed by the Spirit."*

When the Holy Spirit is present, we may recognize the presence, but finding words to describe the experience or what it might mean, isn't easy. Another of the prayers from the book of Celtic Prayers describes the soul. It may also be a prayer which in some ways reflects the Holy Spirit.

I am a flame of fire, blazing with passionate love.
I am a spark of light, illuminating the deepest truth;
I am a rough ocean, heaving with righteous anger,
I am a calm lake, comforting the troubled breast;
I am a wild storm, raging at human sins;
I am a gentle breeze, blowing hope in the saddened heart;
I am dry dust, choking worldly ambition;
I am wet earth, bearing rich fruits of grace. (p. 37)

- 2) During your study reflection time, focus on the scripture for the next session. Scripture: Acts 9

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read, "Behind the Text" and the “Observations/Consider” portions. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Words to carry with you -

I am a part of an ecumenical group of people who came together around a need we saw in our community, a place for single homeless women who need help in getting their lives together, so that they can lead whole and productive lives. This is a huge project which involves finding a house and all kinds of things. A few nights ago we met with someone who has already done a similar thing elsewhere. She said to us, if this is going to happen you will need to come to it with constant prayer, deep passion, unlimited patience, perseverance even on the most difficult days and it has to be personal, it has to grow out of who you are. God’s spirit came to the followers as it comes to us and transforms our ordinary lives. That’s the free part of the bargain. As for the rest of it the above formula will serve us well, the five P’s: Prayer, Passion, Patience, Perseverance, and Personal Commitment

Prayer

As you have done in each session, notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. If there are special joys or concerns share them with one another.

Response (Unison)

**On those who day is drab
Come, Holy Spirit
On those who harbor fear**

**Come, Holy Spirit
On a parched land
Come, Holy Spirit.
Eternal Our God
You create us by your power
And redeem us by your love;
Guide and strengthen us by your Spirit,
That we may give ourselves in love and service
To one another and to you.**

From the Holy Island Prayer Book, pp. 78-79

Blessing

**Great Spirit, Wild Goose* of the Almighty
Be my eye in the dark places
Be my flight in the trapped places
Be my host in the wild places
Be my formation in the lost places
Be my brood in the barren places**

Celtic blessing, Holy Island Prayer Book, p. 77

Song: *Lo, I am with you -- #430 Chalice Hymnal*

*Wild Goose is the Celtic Image of the Holy Spirit. About it someone wrote, "*The Spirit is like the Wild Goose. You never know when it will come. It flaps in at will and leaves when it chooses and generally leaves a mess behind.*" What has been tidy and orderly often isn't, after the Holy Spirit turns our lives upside down.