

THE PEACE OF ONE VOICE
Acts 2: 1-21; John 20: 19-23
Pentecost Sunday • May 31, 2020
by Pat Berger

There are moments in our lives. Each of us has them. Remember the moment when you figured out how to read? The moment when you first took communion? Or perhaps the moment when you heard that a particular war was over. Or maybe the moment when our state was shut down to try to contain the COVID virus? Likely you remember where you were when you experienced these things, and likely you remember the ones who were with you.

Our two readings on this Pentecost morning are retellings of moments that I am certain those who were there would remember, moments that formed them and formed their community. A sound, while they were indoors, like the "rush of a violent wind"? Divided tongues, "like of fire"? Memorable moments, indeed. And then, the peace of one voice, but more on that later.

The reading from the Book of the Acts reports a moment that happened during the Jewish celebration called Pentecost. At the time of the writing of our scripture readings for today, there were three major Jewish festivals. If you were an adult male -- that meant males who had reached at least the age of 12 -- if you were an adult male and lived within 20 miles of Jerusalem, you would be expected to be at the temple at the celebration of these three: Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. Pentecost was so named because it fell 50 days after Passover. On this holiday, Jews celebrated the giving of the commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and they offered loaves in gratitude for the completion of the harvest. No work would be done on this day, and the streets would be filled with people.

We have heard the story; in fact, we have likely heard the story and heard the story -- but: what?? The disciples and perhaps a few others were gathered in that room, waiting and praying, as we heard last week -- that's the easy part to picture in our heads. Then: suddenly, from heaven, a sound that was like that of a rush of a violent wind. This will be quite a different image for us to read than it is for those who live in Bangladesh, where they have recently experienced a very violent wind, a cyclone. Some of you may have experienced cyclones or tornadoes or hurricanes; I am grateful that -- so far -- that is not a part of my life experience.

So, sounds of a strong wind, we read, but no reports of any physical impacts of that. And then, divided tongues as of fire -- not tongues of fire, but tongues as of fire -- resting on each of them. They could see these tongues, but apparently as close as Luke can come to describing them for his readers is to tell what they were like, not what they were. No reports of fire damage -- just tongues resting on each

of them. And then: the filling with Holy Spirit, and the ability to speak in other languages. Jews from every nation were in the streets, and they managed to hear what was being said in their own language. Several years ago, I worshiped often with the Spanish-language church in our Presbytery. I don't speak Spanish, but enough of other romance languages that, if I read the scriptures before I went to worship, I could pretty much understand the sermon. It wasn't quite like hearing it in my own language, but close enough that it always made me think of this Pentecost experience.

Probably, instead of speaking in other languages, the disciples were "speaking in tongues". All of the peoples mentioned in our reading most likely spoke Greek, as that was sort of a universal language at that time, and likely they also spoke Aramaic. More amazing, no doubt, to all who heard this was that the disciples, whether just The Twelve or a larger group, were speaking fearlessly and passionately about Jesus and about the mission that was to be theirs. That they seemed to be doing this without regard for what might be the results from Jewish or Roman authorities, and that many of them may have been "speaking in tongues" as a result of the religious experience they had just had would certainly have caused the reaction they received from those who observed them. Clearly, popular wisdom would have had it, the disciples must have been full of new wine. Well, we are told by Peter, they COULDN'T be full of wine -- it was only 9:00 in the morning! They had, though, been filled with Holy Spirit.

John's account, on the other hand, has this event happening in the afternoon, and at that in the afternoon of the Monday after Easter, not 50 days later. Here, they were behind closed doors, or, depending on which translation one uses, even LOCKED doors, for fear of the Jews. And: Jesus came and stood among them. Another of those moments one would remember, don't you think?

"Peace be with you," he said. "Peace be with you," and then he showed them his hands and his sides. And they rejoiced! You will recall that in chapter 16 in John's gospel, as he told the disciples of his impending death, Jesus had told his disciples that when he saw them again, they would rejoice, and here we have it -- they were rejoicing! Then Jesus said, "Peace be with you," again, and this time, as it says in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, they received his words not just as a greeting, but as a gift from the one they called "Lord". His next words -- "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" -- reminded the disciples (and remind us) of words from Jesus' prayer in chapter 17 of John.

Then he breathed on them, they received Holy Spirit, and he told them, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." This, then, was the task for the disciples: to continue the work given to Jesus by God. They would not be the ones forgiving sins; rather, they were the ones sent, as Jesus had been, accompanied by Holy Spirit, to tell about God, who

is the one who forgives. They would be the ones telling words of peace. I imagine the disciples slowly beginning to breathe again. They did not need to be afraid again, ever. There were no tongues of fire; they weren't all understanding every language. There was just Jesus, standing there among them, offering them peace, and Holy Spirit. Words of peace, indeed.

So maybe now they could begin to visualize who they were being sent to be and what they were being sent to do. How would God's Kingdom grow? Some would go to preach, some would go to teach, some to heal, some to listen, all of them with Holy Spirit at their sides, and all potentially to do, as Jesus had said, greater things than he had done.

What does it mean in our lives, that we have been sent, and that Holy Spirit walks beside us? One commentator wrote, "In the midst of fear, uncertainty, and unbelieving, Jesus brings peace and comfort, not with mere words of reassurance, but with the very ongoing incarnation of the Word in the lives of his disciples with the gift of the Paraclete." Of Holy Spirit. For some of us it might be sounds of rushing wind, and tongues like of fire. For some of us, it may well be the peace of one voice. And for any of us, it may seem as if it is one of those today and the other tomorrow. During this time of virus and distancing, we may have done some rethinking of how all of that is real and restorative in our own lives. Perhaps we respond differently than we might have a couple of months ago. Each day, and for different reasons, we can remember who Jesus is in our lives, and how Holy Spirit makes that real, and the difference that all of that makes for us. We can express thanks for these gifts, and be ready for opportunities that we have to share them with others.

Some opportunities, we have now. We could tell stories of the times that doing these things, when responding to a nudge from Holy Spirit, has resulted in our doing quality work in our little portion of the Kingdom. Likely we will rarely know which of our encounters has led to a "moment" for someone else; we do know, though, when one has made a "moment" for us. Our world feels a bit more tenuous right now than it did a few short weeks ago. I don't think we can afford to wait for opportunities to be a voice of peace for others. Gina took the check from the Presbytery to the food bank last week, and she can show you the picture she has of a nice lady with a very big smile on her face because of that gift. We have another gift coming from the Presbytery for virus impact relief in this area; some have ideas for that already, and I foresee more smiling faces. Jesus has sent us as God sent him; Holy Spirit accompanies us as we go; it is our turn to make a difference, to be the difference. To be voices that speak peace.

Let us pray.