

Acts 2: 1-21  
Romans 8: 22-27  
John 15: 26-27; 16: 4b-15

Special Effects  
May 24, 2015 Pentecost Sunday  
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Sometimes the recurring seasons of the church year bring a sense of déjà vu. I was ordained into Christian ministry here on Pentecost Sunday, 1998. I preached my “candidating” sermon here on Pentecost Sunday, 2010, before being called as your senior (and only) pastor. Now I am getting ready to set off on a sabbatical on Pentecost Sunday, 2015. No, I do **not** wait all year for Pentecost to come before I do anything important. I am just taking note of this interesting coincidence and sequence. So what do we do, how do we worship, **this** Pentecost Sunday?

There are a lot of resources out there for pastors to help prepare for the celebration of Pentecost. We are told, though it is usually news to those in the pews, that this is the third most important celebration of the church year. This Sunday is often called “the birthday of the church,” so those planning worship are urged to bring red helium balloons, or a birthday cake, or party hats, so that everyone can get the picture, and hopefully, get the feeling, that this is a super-happy day. They say, bring on the confetti, bring on the noisemakers, bring on the exuberance. Shake everyone awake: it’s Pentecost! It is an opportunity for special effects, since the Acts reading seems so theatrical. I saw a video posted on Facebook the other day of a Pentecost Sunday in a big Atlanta church a few years ago. They had two projection screens, and during the call to worship, the sanctuary was dark, and dramatic videos of water and wind and fire were played, and there was a rushing sound of wind coming over the sound system, and then the candles behind the pulpit (this was a very big church) seemed to be magically lit, and two urns started shooting flames of fire up, and then the choir and congregation starting singing a Pentecost hymn “We Are the Church Alive” with a full orchestra - not a very singable hymn, in my opinion, in spite of all the brass and the 50 member choir. Most of the congregation was just standing there with their mouths open. Maybe the special effects had just blown them away – or maybe they were afraid to sing.

Here in Norwich, Vermont, we tend to be a little more restrained, don’t we? Sure, our first hymn was a little different. We have red candles instead of white ones on the communion table. But I get the feeling that there is a certain distrust of flamboyance here, a certain reserve. And that’s fine: each local church has its own modes of worship and expression. Here is something to ponder, though. What special effect do we hope for when we worship together or gather to do God’s work? If not flames appearing over our heads, then how are we warmed and inspired? If not wind rushing through the room, then how are we enlivened and encouraged to take new risks? If not speaking a variety of languages, then how do we communicate the joy and enthusiasm of our faith? How are we affected by the Spirit, and what effect will we have on the world?

We ought to consider these questions every day, but today it has particular resonance. Today we need the Pentecost story in our worship life, as we begin a transitional time and need inspiration. We need to hear this strange and unbelievable story, with all its special effects, to get us thinking. We stumble over the long list of foreign visitors to Jerusalem, not even sure where all those places **are**. To me that list is a symbol of all the unknown places in our contemporary world that need to hear a word from us. The list of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and

Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, *and* Rome stand in for all of our neighbors, Norwichians and Hanoverians and Upper Valleyians, and the parts of Vermont and New Hampshire belonging to New England, and people belonging to Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. The Holy Spirit enables us to draw up alongside them as companions on the way. We could be a sign of hope, a sign of peace and reconciliation. We could be a place of refuge. We could sing beautiful music together. In the daily life of our congregation, in mission and advocacy, in hospitality and worship, in stewardship of this place and of the natural world, we could represent God's renewing energy and God's endless consolation.

The Pentecost story reminds us that each person listening to the inspired disciples heard them in his or her own native language. This might be imagined as the language of their need. They heard the word they needed to hear from God. And it was various. Was it a word of promise, such as Jesus spoke to his disciples, telling of a companion Spirit to help discern the truth? Was it a word of consolation or hope, challenge or encouragement? For each of them, for each of us, for each one we meet, the language of need hears and speaks in its own way.

We call Pentecost the birthday of the church; but it was an important Jewish festival before it became a Christian festival. It was one of three pilgrimage festivals that were ideally spent in the holy city of Jerusalem. It occurred fifty days after the Passover--which was the celebration and commemoration of Israel's liberation from Egypt. The people remembered not only the giving of the covenant to Israel at Mt. Sinai, but also the creation of a peculiar and holy community--a radically different way of living after slavery in Egypt. The early Christians remembered all this, and this Pentecost day led to a new understanding of community for them as well.

Birthdays are usually happy, but they recall a process that was fraught with pain and danger and uncertainty. The birth process can be dramatic enough: it does not need our special effects to make it more interesting. This was true for the early church, and for all new expressions of church. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, talks about the church community and indeed, all creation, groaning with labor pains as it and they and we await the unfolding of God's purposes. He writes of hope: hope not yet seen. The Holy Spirit is active within us as hope, carrying us through uncertainty, "helping us in our weakness", as Paul says, "praying within us with sighs too deep for words." Groaning and sighing: these very visceral, very human actions, deeper and more real than all the pyrotechnics a special effects team can offer. Pentecost acknowledges the uncertainty **and** possibility intrinsic to our becoming a peculiar and holy community of God's people.

So, what do we pray for **this** Pentecost Sunday 2015? What can we use from Scripture to describe our hopes for the coming season and year? I will pray that the Holy Spirit as Advocate, Comforter and Spirit of Truth, will come to us as Jesus promised and "declare to you the things that are to come." I will pray that you find a way to come together in one place -- which is what the disciples did in preparation for the Spirit's arrival. I will pray that a sound like the rush of a violent wind fills the room where you are sitting...or at least, a sense of the power you have within you for positive change. I will pray that divided tongues, as of fire, will rest on each of your heads...or at least, that you will be warmed and inspired by God's love to share that love with others. I will pray that you speak in other languages, as the Spirit gives you ability....or at least, that you find the language of need, yours and others'. And that these new and varied languages will flourish in a beautiful cacophony of kindness and service. I might even pray that the joy and enthusiasm of this season makes you appear a little intoxicated to those who look in from the outside: a holy

intoxication with the prophetic and compassionate word of God. There is uncertainty in all this. What will it look like? God only knows.

One thing I do know: in all these stories of unlikely and unbelievable special effects and strange metaphor, God is calling us. In some ways, God is merely calling us home, home to our best selves and the best that community has to offer. It will be new, it will be an adventure, but in many ways, it is a homecoming.

And so I close with some words from Desmond Tutu, one way of taking hold of the promise of Pentecost. He wrote:

"We are made for goodness. We are made for love.

We are made for friendliness.

We are made for togetherness.

We are made for all of the beautiful things you and I know.

We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders.

All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all.

We are meant all, all to belong to this family, this human family, God's family."

Amen.