

**“Fire Assurance”**  
**+ Pentecost B +**  
Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27,16:4b-15  
**May 24, 2015**

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

What Jesus had promised in today’s Gospel, was delivered big time on Pentecost - a day like no other, a day the likes of which you and I can only pray we see or hear the likes of again in our lifetimes; a day that started out, I suppose, like any other day, with Jesus’ followers “all together in one place;” 10 days after He had left their sight, promising that they would see Him again and in the meantime would find their comfort and their courage through this mysterious thing called an “advocate” – that’s PARACALEO in Greek and it means literally someone or something that is “called alongside you,” in kind of the same way we say to someone “I’ve got your back”; the “Holy Spirit” whose presence is known only by the actions produced by the Holy Spirit that is God; 10 days in which to wonder what Jesus meant by that, and when would it be and how would they know and how in the world it could be “to (their) advantage,” that He/Jesus (went) “away?”

I think we can all think of a time when we wanted even someone we loved – a parent or sibling, spouse or child to “leave us alone” but not permanently – how could that be “to your advantage?” More on that later but first we need to dissect the very first sentence of the story of Pentecost as we have it in Acts, chapter two, “(the apostles) were “all together in one place.” The obvious interpretation is that they had nowhere else to go where they felt safe, nor anyone else trustworthy enough to share their company than those who’d been with Jesus throughout his ministry. After all, the disciples were still very much wanted men and women.

Yes, they could have gone back to Galilee as they had after the resurrection, but Jesus said to “wait” in Jerusalem. But I wonder if we can expand that a bit as an encouragement to the entire church, including Jehovah Lutheran, that we here in this place strive to be “all together,” - of one heart, one mind, one spirit – marked and known to others for how we “love one another.”

That is not a call for all of us to think alike, talk alike, act alike, but the simple truth is that ever since the days of the apostles, the holy catholic and apostolic church, has struggled to be

“all together,” with the result that currently there are about 1,200 denominations in the U.S. and there have been 34,000 worldwide since the birth of the Holy catholic Church on Pentecost. I’d say we’re not doing so well on the “be one, as the Father and I are one.”

This is not, however, a call for unity regardless of belief because the content of the faith we believe and teach matters. It matters a lot. Unfortunately the world outside often hears only the noise of the disagreements among denominations and not a united witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord. We dare not get so used to the unfortunate fact of our separation over doctrinal differences that we simply surrender to all our divisions and stop striving to be “all together.”

Back in Jerusalem in their hiding place the disciples could hear the tourists crowding the streets of Jerusalem, come to celebrate the Pentecost, or as they called it Shovuo which means literally “weeks” and it stood for the 7 weeks of 7 days each (two perfect numbers multiplied by each other plus one more to make it tidy as they celebrated the spring harvest. Shovuo was one of the big three of the Jewish yearly celebrations which ever pious Jew was expected to observe in Jerusalem. Can you imagine telling your boss “I need six weeks 3 times a year to travel to Jerusalem.”

That is what brought all those Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylians, Egyptians, Libyans, Romans, Cretans and Arabs into town. Talk about chaos! Every one of them speaking his or her own native tongue, co-mingled with Hebrew and Aramaic (which most would have known as well, although accented and pronounced somewhat differently) and here in the midst of all that, by 9 am (way too early to go on a bender, as the disciples were initially accused) so early that if it were happening today, most of us would not even have had our caffeine buzz going, something strange was about to happen; the Spirit of God was moving and when the Spirit moves, the results can be spectacular; even today—though perhaps we don’t expect it to.

A friend of mine told me of someone newly returned from an evangelism crusade in India and who was absolutely blown away by the numbers, the thousands and tens of thousands of people who for the first time had even heard about Jesus and who wanted to become His disciples, turning to Jesus in faith for baptism, the assurance of salvation for now and into

eternity and freedom from the prison of Hinduism. You just never know what the Spirit is up to, until you start to see the results as the wind of the Holy Spirit of God blows where it wills.

That is exactly what is happening in Acts - a wind, but not a wind, the *sound* of a wind, fills the entire house. A holy chaos, marked by those little “divided tongues, as of fire,” (*but not fire itself*) resting on each of them, teaching them and leading them to speak in the languages of the pilgrims in Jerusalem, summoned by the Spirit-sound to see what was happening. Speech that made sense, not meaningless babble, but real words for real people; all of those folks whose names give lectors fits every Pentecost when they have to read the first lesson. Among those amazed, probably none were more astounded than the disciples as Jesus covered them and empowered them with Pentecostal “**Fire Assurance.**”

Assurance, not insurance. Insurance is something you get to protect yourself from risk. Assurance is risky because what God’s Spirit did with sounds of wind and flames like fire turned the world upside down and inside out. So what was God thinking that day? I try not to speculate too freely about the mind of God but perhaps these were divine fireworks to herald not a new beginning, but the fulfillment of what had been promised so long ago, “spoken through the prophet Joel.”

Now I mentioned earlier that each of the pilgrims to Jerusalem would have known Aramaic and the Hebrew known by all Jews so why speak to them in their native tongue instead of their shared language? The answer, I believe, is as simple as why people from Ethiopia, Liberia or India where English is the national language still speak the language of their culture or tribe. Those other languages at Pentecost were necessary to proclaim Jesus, as they were to speak as God often speaks, not to the ears and to the mind, but to the heart. In my years in ministry in Chicago so many of our oldest members had worshiped, learned their memory verses and Catechism in German. That was the language of their heart-felt faith and often I would sing to them the German hymns my mother sang to us as children. Their faces would light up as if they were hearing their papa or mama oma/mutti or opa singing to them - they felt at home.

And when all of those Parthians and Medes and the whole bunch heard the story of Jesus in their native tongues, God was speaking to their hearts; it was like coming home, the home

from which prodigals run away and to which prodigals return to find forgiveness and acceptance and love.

3,000 were added to the numbers of the brand-spanking new church that day – but there were hundreds of thousands of extra visitors in Jerusalem for the festival. Despite the sound of wind and tongues of flame, the miraculous languages and the powerful Spirit-filled preaching not everyone who heard it then or who hears it now will receive the gift of faith – the Good News of Jesus as Savior and Lord. The scoffers that day said, “They are filled with new wine/drunken as a skunk.” That’s a term theologians have and continue to argue about. Some say New wine is grape juice – but grape juice isn’t wine until it is fermented and has alcoholic content. New wine is sweet wine; while some of its sugar has not yet turned to alcohol it is pretty potent and so sweet it goes down so easily.

Whatever the meaning—we’ll know someday—there’s a little warning in there to all those of whom the Spirit has set afire with its blessed assurance. You might think about that in a few moments as you gather up here at the altar to drink the sweet wine of the blood of Christ. Not everyone will approve or appreciate the Christian witness you bring to the world. I’m not talking about disagreements and interpretations. I’m talking about the basics. To talk about Jesus is to talk about sin and its consequences—the cross, in other words—and that kind of talk is no less offensive to the ears of unbelievers than it was 2,000 years ago. People don’t like to hear how God visited this world and we killed Him. People don’t like to face up to their own sins and shortcomings – to see their need for a Savior. It is difficult for all of us to face our own sins – easier to point to the sins of others. It is difficult in our times for people to believe that God numbers our days – we have Doctors, cures, medicines – we have plans for our own future for our success but God is God and it is only in humbly turning to God by faith that we can give all of our sins over for forgiveness, all our time and aspirations to God for God to lead and guide us as we continue to share the Gospel – to tell the story of sin and grace, of rebellion and redemption, of life and death, all wrapped up in Jesus of Nazareth. And then we pray, simply pray, for the Spirit to set another heart on fire and prepare ourselves to watch the miracle of faith being born. Amen.

Now may our mighty God who breathes His Spirit into us, continue to impart that same Spirit among us, to transform us by His truth and give us the words and the way to proclaim the Good News.

**P: Trusting the Holy Spirit's power always at work, we pray for the church, the world, and all of God's creation.**

A: For your church throughout the world as it receives your Holy Spirit, for all believers who share the sure and certain hope of salvation through Jesus Christ alone. For advocates of truth, forgiveness that they would know more fully the peace which only you can give. For perseverance in prayer. Hear us, O God.

A: For all nations as they seek guidance. For government and tribal leaders in their local communities, for international organizations, for translators and interpreters, for peacemakers looking for ways to find safe refuge for all who are fleeing war and poverty. Hear us, O God.

A: For those who suffer as they long for healing. For those who are lonely or forgotten, for those who are ill (especially Marty & Lowell Riewe, Verna Durband, Sheryl Lewis, Paula Sanders, Gerry Miske and Jerry Gagner). For veterans and all military personnel, as well as those who advocate on their behalf (especially Suicide Prevention Workers who minister to soldier suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Hear us, O God.

A: For this worshiping community that we might truly model what it means to be one in your love. Hear us, O God.

A: We remember saints led by your Spirit. Open our eyes to your work in the world and may the witness to the Gospel given by those called to faith in our time inspire others to turn to you for salvation and hope for the world to come. Hear us, O God.

P: Receive these prayers, gracious God, and those prayers known only to you. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**