

Pentecost 2011

[Everyone is invited to be seated, then a video is played – see it here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmweXyEeoBw>]

It's Pentecost. I wanted us to watch that video firstly because it's great and it's hip and it's nice to use some technology from time to time and hear some music we don't usually hear in church, but I also wanted us to watch it because I believe it takes us to the real heart of what Pentecost is all about for us.

We can call today the Church's birthday if we want to and have a cake and so on, or we can focus on those post-Ascension disciples huddled in the upper room, or we can listen to Peter's sermon and marvel at the thousands who responded, but the problem with all those things is that they take us back; back to a specific time, back to a specific place, back to then, and ultimately for us Pentecost isn't about back then, it's about right now.

Pentecost is of course a specific event – Shavuot, the festival of weeks, fifty days after Passover – and it's at Pentecost that Luke's version of the story takes place in Acts. But the point of the story – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the impact that has on the disciples – that doesn't really have anything to do with the actual Pentecost day at all. In fact, what we find throughout the Book of Acts, and elsewhere, is that the Holy Spirit continues to be poured out, over and over again, on all sorts of people in all sorts of places at all sorts of times, but with very similar results. In John the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples at Easter. The very first time Jesus appears to a group of the disciples he gives them – literally breathes into them – the Holy Spirit.

The point is this: it doesn't have to be Pentecost for the Holy Spirit to show up. What we might call the Pentecost experience happens all the time. So will it happen to us? And when it does, do we really know what to expect?

I think our usual experience of the Pentecost story leaves us with an unrealistic impression of what this Holy Spirit business is all about. We hear about the roaring wind and the tongues of fire and the amazing linguistic abilities suddenly poured out on the disciples, and we get from all that the impression that Pentecost is about power and victory and celebration and strength; like some sort of superheroes, the disciples are suddenly imbued with these incredible powers and they fly off to save the world, but one of the reasons why I wanted us to see the video is because it creatively suggests that this isn't what Pentecost is about at all, and especially not for us.

David Lose, the writer of that video, talks about the two paradoxes of Pentecost. Firstly, he says, the Holy Spirit doesn't come to solve our problems but to create them. The disciples are sitting in a locked room. Jesus has gone and they're safe. The possibility exists for them to just go back to their old lives. The boats are still there, the fish are still biting. Then the Holy Spirit comes and those options fly straight out the door. Suddenly

they're outside, in the streets, telling their story, changing their lives forever, and not in a safe kind of way.

That's what the Holy Spirit does. It forces us out of our safe places, comfort zones, and into the world around us. It makes us share our story, in words and actions and attitudes and relationships. It takes us out, and out isn't easy. Out can be a problem. The Holy Spirit doesn't come and solve our problems, with more money or people or children or families; the Holy Spirit comes and gives us new problems instead.

The second paradox of Pentecost according to David Lose is that the Holy Spirit doesn't prevent failure but invites it. Over and over again we see the disciples turned apostles being thrown into lost causes, impossible situations, and while sometimes they have miraculous successes, sometimes they don't. Cornell West once said, "Sure it was a failure, but it was a *good* failure." Sometimes the Holy Spirit leads us into good failures, and in those times we're invited to remember that the resurrection only happened after the crucifixion.

So this Pentecost, as the video reminded us, we get bad news and good news. The bad news: no one is coming to fix our problems for us. If we're asking God to bring us more people, more money, more whatever, Pentecost says 'think again'. The good news: everything we need is already here. The Spirit comes and brings strength, courage and compassion, and an overwhelming urge to share our story, and it all starts with me, and you, and each and every one of us; sharing, praying, caring, listening, loving, holding, teaching, being out there.

It's Pentecost, so here's the question. Are we waiting? And are we ready to embrace what we're waiting for?