

Year B
Pentecost
Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 104:24-34, 35b
Romans 8:22-27
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Yes, it is Pentecost, sometimes called the Birthday of the Church! It's a day to celebrate the miracle of the arrival of the Holy Spirit to Jesus's followers, AND their ability to spread his message to *all* people. [With reading the passage from Acts like we did, we wanted to give a little sense of what it must have been like when the disciples were given the gift of speaking in different languages.] In your imagination, magnify what you heard, and add the sound of a rushing, violent wind, and tongues of fire hovering above each speaker. It would have been a very dramatic way of spreading the Gospel. And that is exactly what the disciples were asked to do—tell the world about who Jesus was, and that his promise of salvation was for everyone. Every year at Pentecost we tell this story to one another to remind one another of who we are: we are the Church. We are followers of Jesus. We believe that repentance and forgiveness, and eternal life are available to anyone who calls upon Jesus's name. We are the Church: we work to love God, to love one another, and to love our neighbors. Pentecost is a time to remember and celebrate this identity every year.

But during this time of pandemic, when we are masked and socially distanced, barely out of the emotional trauma that has resulted from COVID, it can be hard to be excited about being the Church. When we are struggling with things at Christ Church not being as we would want them in so many ways, it can be hard to think about what it means to be the Church (with a capital C). Several studies have referred to our times being “post-Christendom” and the fact that, for the first time in our history, fewer than 50% of Americans say that they even believe in God seems to support that. And so what do we do with all of this? It is troubling. We are all dealing with the fallout of COVID, in one way or another. And a lot of us are unhappy with various situations in the Church. At the same time, I submit to you that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is a thing that is *continually* happening. Remember, in today's gospel we just heard Jesus say that when he left, he would leave the Advocate, his Holy Spirit to be with us ALWAYS. So we have access to the Holy Spirit all the time. All the time. And if we look at the history of the Church, the Spirit is especially active when the Church is under stress. In fact, when the Church is being persecuted, that is when we see people doing amazing witness in Jesus's name.

You probably remember that the early Church was persecuted, and that many people were martyred in Rome. In fact, most of our earliest saints were martyrs—they were killed for their faith. For instance, Saint Lawrence who was a deacon, was said to have been grilled alive; Saint Perpetua a noblewoman, and her slave Felicity were executed at the military games that were held as entertainment to celebrate the emperor's birthday; and Saint Peter, the Rock on which Jesus built his Church, was

crucified by Emperor Nero. But Peters said he was unworthy to die as his Lord had died, so at his request, he was crucified upside-down. And yet, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Church continued, and grew stronger. Eventually Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Today, we see that the Church is most vibrant in the Southern Hemisphere, where it has been persecuted from Chile to Brazil, throughout Africa, to China. Sometimes it's hard to wrap my mind around the fact that Christians all over the world are martyred every day. Every day people are killed for following Jesus. But here in the U.S., for so long we have been free to worship as we please. Because of that we really take it for granted. In this country, freedom of worship is our right—it's written into our founding document. And I think this freedom allows for a certain amount of apathy. If suddenly Christianity became illegal in the U.S., how would that affect us? I mean, if we could be arrested for sitting in these pews, what would we do? I imagine we would find other places, and other ways to worship—but my point is really that we DON'T have to do that. What we are doing is legal, and, come next week it will be even easier to do, as some of the diocesan restrictions are lifted. Next Sunday you will be able to sit where you want to sit, and come to service without pre-registering, and we will all be SINGING together again! The details will be in your email tomorrow.

So as we look forward to the return of some of what we're used to, let's not take it for granted. WE are the Church. Let's celebrate Pentecost by looking for the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit in the days and weeks to come. It might not be a tongue of flame over your head, but the Spirit will come. Ask for it. Watch for it. WE are the Church.

Amen

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis