

Pentecost Sunday  
June 9, 2019  
Church of the Advent  
Rev. Ellen Richardson

## **Pentecost Red**

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.*

As we gather this morning to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, marking the end of the 50 days of Eastertide and the beginning of Ordinary Time, our flashy liturgical red--the same color as hazard lights--marks the transition from heavenly white to earthly green. It reminds us of the transition between that short season when the resurrected Jesus walked the earth, and the much longer one that followed after Jesus left his ministry in the hands of his followers, which over time has come to include *us*. On this 50th day, the ancient Greek meaning of the word *Pentecost*, we also celebrate the person of the Trinity we call the Holy Spirit, or *Holy Ghost* by our Christian ancestors.



There are many images and metaphors used to try to explain the Holy Spirit: light, doves, hearts, fire, although a ghost might just be the best one. Some call the Spirit he, and some she, though there is no assigned gender for the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Some know her as the Holy Comforter, the essence of God we seek in places of quiet contemplation or desperate darkness. We pray for the visitation of that “sacred something” when we need to feel God’s presence in our lives—craving reassurance that all shall be well, even when it seems not to be. We call on the Holy Spirit to preserve us and keep us—as well as those we love and worry about. We hope for the Spirit to flood us with healing or to awaken us gently with the still small voice of God bringing us direction, or peace. To be sure, all of these experiences of the Holy Spirit are good and right and real and worthy of our prayerful appreciation.

Our readings today offer us glimpses of a *mightier* Spirit in action. Where is the *comfort* in finding tongues of fire over the heads of the cowering disciples, or in them being thrust unprepared into a public arena to show off brand new abilities they hadn't really asked for. How *Holy* is a Spirit who makes one appear to be irresponsibly drunk—at nine o'clock in the morning? How peaceful is a Spirit who calls us to the edge of reasonableness, who stirs up our hearts and makes them burn for God, and then expects some risky response from us? How do we understand a volatile and unpredictable force without a clear identity, one that takes us over and pushes us into the service of God's higher purposes, ready or not? Perhaps we might find answers in an even older story.

Our reading from Genesis is set in an ancient time of migrating people who God intended to expand out into the whole world. The people had other ideas; they longed to stop wandering and to settle down and secure a place where they could feel safe—becoming one people with one language—so they began to build a city with a tall tower in a place called Babel. When the Lord went down to see this city with its tower and saw the people's impulse to conform and enclose themselves in their own desires, to exclude those who were different from them, God was not impressed. God's intention was for creation to thrive in diversity, not uniformity, in generosity, not in self-preservation. The Lord knows that it is our human insistence on sameness that causes our conflicts; when we grow to accept our differences, everyone grows in wisdom and love. We learn more from adversity than complacency. We flourish not when human power and resources are concentrated, but when they are shared and offered to fulfill the needs of the world. And so God gave the people many different languages, so they could not so easily communicate with one another, not so readily concentrate their power, and so the people scattered over the whole earth, becoming pilgrims in the Wilderness, always strangers in a strange land, listening and learning and living with others wherever they went, always on a journey to see the face of God.

The Pentecost story from Acts offers an ironic reminder of the story of Babel. Just as the people scattered widely from Babel because they lost any incentive to stay within their towering walls when they could no longer understand each other, the disciples moved outside the safety and imagined security of the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit gave them the power to be understood in many languages. Whether they became multi-lingual, or each one each spoke in a

different language to a crowd that was blessed with understanding, as if they were all wearing headphones that came with a United Nations translation service, the point is that *God* does not speak a single language and never will. When Jesus said, *may they all be made one*, he did not mean that everyone should become indistinguishable or identical. Rather he meant that our oneness become an expression of God's love *across* our differences of thought and experience and perspective and gifts, color and gender, family and identity, geography and history, race and nationality and language. To be made *one* as Jesus and the Father and the Spirit are *One*, does not mean that we are meant to be *alike* in all things, but rather that we are bonded in love of one another precisely *because of* those things that make each one of us unique and special--and different. When we say we were made in God's image, it does not mean that God has only one perfect image that we are supposed to reflect; rather it means that each and all of us reflects *something about God*. One of the favorite T-shirts I have ever seen was on a wheelchair-bound teenager with profound physical disabilities; it said, *Your God is Too Small*. That phrase has come back to haunt me many times in my life, and I am always reminded of it in moments of Resurrection, and in moments of Pentecost.

The Lord God sent his only Son to teach his scattered pilgrim people who had lost their way that the way of life was to be the way of love, however challenging and contrary to what we teach ourselves. We humans can't help ourselves from building and rebuilding our Babel cities, hoping that, *this time*, walls and towers will surely make us safe and secure in our isolation, and in our common language. And so the Son of God came and roamed the earth, and died and rose again, and walked through the walls, and ascended to heaven, and then Holy Spirit came like a whirlwind to pull the walls right down---letting in light and air and love and comfort and strength and peace, so the disciples could begin again, to scatter across the world, to follow and to teach the way of love Jesus had shown and taught them in his mortal lifetime.

What is the Spirit of God saying to God's people in *this* place, in our time? What new stories are we being given to inspire us to venture outside our well-crafted walls of self-protection, exclusion and retreat? What new languages are working their way into our hearts and minds, making room for a broader perspective or an attitude adjustment? If taken seriously, the celebration of Pentecost is about all of these things, and more: overcoming fear, believing in new

beginnings, hearing and speaking new languages, absorbing holy energy, and inviting God to create clean hearts in us, and to renew a right spirit within us.

Jesus told the disciples not to be afraid when the Advocate was to come from the Father to fill them with peace. Nor should *we* be afraid, or let our God get too small for those burning flashes of the Holy Spirit to turn our lives upside down and inside out. When Pentecost moments come, there is not much we can do, really, but to recognize that red hazard light flashing up ahead, consider ourselves warned, recognize the source, be grateful, and go with it--ready or not. For as much as we resist scattering in the wilderness, that is where we are being sent, and that is where we will see the face of God. Amen.