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Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

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The New Age

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Sermon

There is many a lay leader, many a pastor, many an everyday pew sitter who looks at their church, and looks back. So many of us declare, with some exaggeration and hyperbole, but also some sad truth that this community, this church has left its “Golden Age.” We recall a time filled with children and passion, activities and love... and for some reason we believe it is somehow gone now, or not all here. We blinked, and our “Golden Age” was gone. At this point, most of us would settle for just a Pre-COVID Age... a return to “Normal.” But again... it seems lost to us now, even as we return, things are... different.

The compilers of the biblical canon, the people who chose the books of the bible and ordered them, seem to agree with such a sentiment. The Hebrew Scriptures begin with the recounting of an idyllic time in humanity's story, a paradise on earth, the Garden of Eden. This golden age, however, occupies but a tiny space in the Old Testament, as compared with the multi-volume account of the wanderings in the wilderness, the subsequent struggles to claim the Promised Land, and the dreary era of the Babylonian exile. (With only a small pocket of David and Solomon's Golden Age to break it up). And even for all these pages of lost in the wilderness, there is so much talk of restoring what was.

Even so, the two-thousand-year-old history of the Christian Church begins with a golden age of its own, a time when the Good News was proclaimed and mighty works of power were evident (miracles were seen and experienced by many), when believers were all of one heart and soul in cooperation with the Apostles, and they shared all that they had with one another. Not surprisingly, this golden age--like all others--does not last long, but it stands forever as a Camelot, a mythical time and place of great glory, and more than a Camelot, as a foretaste of the glory divine.

And it all began with Pentecost.

We are so accustomed to thinking of Pentecost, or Whitsun (as known in Canada and Various European countries, Whit Monday is even a legal holiday in many) as a Christian holiday that we can forget that it existed as a Jewish feast many centuries before the Christian Church inherited it. Indeed, it is the second of the three great Jewish feasts, occurring fifty days (the word Pentecost means literally 50) after the Passover and celebrates the reaping and giving of first-fruits to God. Pentecost, also known as “Shavuot” the Feast of Weeks, is also appropriately known as the Harvest Festival. It celebrated the reaping of the first crop of Wheat from the fields. More than this, Pentecost commemorated the giving of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, at Mount Sinai, the Mosaic Law that would help form the basis of the community that had proceeded out of Egypt. Unlike Passover, this was not to be a quiet family commemoration, but a time when all the people would come together for a brief time to renew their connection to God and to one another, to recall the ties of both liberty and law that bound them as one. They gathered in the squares of their cities and celebrated with fresh foods and wines, the entire community sharing its bounty with everyone. And, lastly, in an oft-overlooked aspect of the feast, the people of Israel were charged with leaving behind some of the gleanings of their harvest for the poor, the widow, and the alien to be able to collect for their own sustenance. The community of the faithful was to give life and hope to outsiders as well.

In the centuries between the first celebration of that Jewish feast and the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus' followers, Israel's fortunes rose and fell many times. King David's great reign and Solomon's grand temple were long since gone. It was "Herod's Temple", the second temple that Jesus' apostles knew, far smaller and less impressive than its predecessor; and Herod was no David or Solomon, merely a puppet for the Roman occupiers. Is it any wonder that many of the

people living in Palestine at the time of the apostles were longing for restoration of all that had been lost. They were looking for a new harvest of God's glory. Pilgrims and new converts alike made their way to Jerusalem. They came with their frustrations about their present situation, they came with their anxieties about the unknown future, they came with their longings for past glories and a renewed golden age. That Pentecost, the people came.

And so did the Spirit.

"Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where the disciples were sitting. And divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." These images from Acts 2 are compelling images, provocative images, images that bring to mind the wind of God that "swept over the face of the waters" in creation, the breath of God that gave life to the first human being.

With rushing wind and tongues of fire, the apostles experienced the presence of God. In power and in intimacy, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and sent forth to proclaim the good news of God in Christ, to heal aching souls, to bear witness to divine, incomparable love. People responded...thousands of people responded. And that Pentecost day ended quite differently than it had begun. With words that have come to form part of the Church's baptismal covenant, the remainder of Acts 2 offers a memorable summary of the communal life that resulted, with new believers devoting themselves "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers." The apostles displayed "signs and wonders" and their followers had "all things in common," selling their possessions and sharing with one another, and new members were added daily to their number. The Spirit had come. The fearful had found power. A new community was born. It was a very good beginning, a veritable golden age.

And this is where the problem lies.

It has been said that the greatest obstacle to future success is past success. From our failures and mistakes we can learn, but our successes...well, our successes can fool us into thinking that what worked *then* must be what will work *always*. We standardize, systematize, codify. We make a set of rules that try to hold that "Golden Age" in place. Like Peter on the mountain of transfiguration, we try to build tents and stay there. He wanted to build tents for Jesus, Elijah and Moses, he wanted to hold them and himself in that moment, but Christ sent him down the mountain. When Jesus Ascends to heaven, again we are asked, "What are you looking at? Go!" We are forced to come down from the mountain, and we spend years pining for what we left behind on the hilltop. The golden age always appears to be back there, back then; and our past successes, our golden ages, all too often get in the way of God's new work that is set before us right now and right in front of us.

Pentecost was a success, a great one, in fact. But the later introduction of newcomers who were somehow different from the insiders created a problematic situation. Tensions began to surface in this new church. Some newcomers, like Barnabas, somehow bridged the gap and were accepted into the group. Others, like the Hellenists, those New Greek Christians in Acts 6, were not accepted. These "newbies," these outsiders, were viewed with some suspicion. They had not been part of that golden age, they didn't know the inside jokes, they didn't fit in. They weren't members of the right club. They were intruders, interlopers. They were Gentiles.

And yet, it is the newcomers, then and now, who often are most open to new possibilities, most open to following the Spirit; even as the insiders long for times past. In Acts, following the success of Pentecost, the apostles actually held back, stayed in place, did good work and built up their own community...but always in the shadow of the temple, always within the limits of their

comfort zone. For the movement to grow beyond its Jewish sectarian roots, new leaders were needed (Like Paul), and a new base established. In Antioch, the city known as "the queen of the east," believers from Jerusalem brought their message, some only to Jews, but others--usually recent newcomers themselves--spoke to gentiles also, to Hellenists and to outsiders, proclaiming that salvation is for "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord."

A great number became believers in Antioch but, more importantly, in Acts chapter 11, verse 26, we come to what may be one of the most important, yet also most underrated, verses of the New Testament: "And it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians." Antioch, not Jerusalem. Out in the mission field they were seen as Christians, not hanging out by the temple, sitting in the pews of the church. Christians were not the ones hiding in the shadow of the temple, they were the ones roughing it out in new places. We may celebrate Pentecost as the "birthday of the Church," but it might be more accurate to speak of it as the conception of the church that came to fruition with something truly new, a new birth, in Antioch and beyond. Only then do we see a separately distinguished group altogether, where believers were willing to reach out to people beyond the normal synagogue membership. Antioch was about to become the base for a new set of missionary endeavors that would reach beyond boundaries both ethnic and geographic. And the apostles sent out from that base would not be from among the original twelve, but rather those former outsiders, Barnabas and Paul, who would serve as Christ's ambassadors and turn their world "upside down."

It began with Pentecost, but it could not stop there. Because the good news is that the golden age is not sometime back then, whenever *then* was. No, the golden age is NOW, and every now yet to come. Indeed, it is the journey itself, as we encounter the living Christ again and again in new and unexpected ways, in new and unexpected people we meet along the way.

Pentecost is a forgotten holiday for most mainline Christians. The preacher brings it up once a year, we wear red and have a procession and then it's forgotten. We hold no celebration, no feasts anymore... we don't buy anything to give to people and don't have some ridiculous fairy tale about a fat man or a rabbit with eggs. No one is getting rich on Pentecost, so we leave it behind, just like that Golden Age.

And honestly, I don't care if you don't celebrate the day, but will you celebrate the Spirit? Those Golden Ages are behind us and will never return, the normal of pre-COVID is gone. But the Spirit is with us, a great wind of energy and a fire of passion is among us. We have a new opportunity, here at Grace, here in the UMC, here in Christ's Church... a chance to get out and get going, a chance to go to Antioch and be known as Christians, instead of... whatever people think we are? When was the last time you had an honest conversation about Christianity and Religion with someone who was Unchurched, Atheist, or of another faith? I am always stunned by the misconceptions and misunderstandings of who they think I am. It's not their fault though... the shame is on me... I'm spending so much time in Jerusalem in the shadow of the temple, I'm not getting out to Antioch and spreading the Spirit... where they might know I'm a Christian by my love.

Today, we will joyously celebrate 3 baptisms and 3 new members. We are celebrating another year of Christ's Church in the World... but after today... it's Go Time! We're not welcoming members and baptizing people so they, or you who are already baptized, can sit around enjoy my fantastic sermons every week and this great music... that's not the point. We're celebrating because we're putting new workers to the field, new people who confess Christ's love and confess a desire to share it with others. The Church Calendar has us prepare for long season so this moment, Advent and Christmas to recognize Christ's coming, Lent and

Easter to see our own sin and salvation, and now we hit Pentecost and it's season, that Longest of all... the working Season. The Moving Season. The Season of Wind and Fire! Welcome to a New Age! A New Age for Grace, a new age Christ and You, a new golden age that you are called to usher in!