

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:25-35,37
Romans 8:14-17
John 15:26-27;16:4b-15

Pentecost B
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Come Holy Spirit, Come

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.”

What does that mean?

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

What does THAT mean?

Questions. Confusion. Fear. Doubt. The words Jesus speaks to his disciples today come in the midst of the very last conversation he had with them before he died. We need to remember that all of these words, all of these things happened in that upper room where the disciples were locked away. Having known Jesus would suffer and die, took this little community to a place of deep sadness, a place of fear and uncertainty. After all, they had come to know God through Jesus, and Jesus was about to disappear from their lives. But he promised them they would not be abandoned when he left – in fact he promised them that he would be with them even after he'd gone.

I am leaving, he told them. Of course he was leaving – he was always to leave. Jesus came among us as the incarnate one, a man of flesh and blood and body... and as we know so well, bodies do not go on forever. But Jesus has always said to us, Do not be afraid. I am leaving, but you will not be abandoned. I am with you always. You may not understand what I am saying now, but you will. The divine Spirit which lives in me will come and live in you, and then you will understand everything.

Whatever the disciples heard Jesus telling them that night, they were still trying to figure it out when they gathered in the upper room on the night that became the Pentecost. Jesus died, then he rose. He appeared among them for a time, then he ascended, and they saw him no more. They thought all they had left were their memories, their stories, and that strange promise of a new form of presence: the Holy Spirit. But when would that Spirit come, and what would it mean for them?

It's an interesting thing to think about, really. At first glance, I guess most of us would say we'd rather have Jesus standing next to us, present in the temporality of our lives, so much better than having some drifty Spirit come among us. After all, the SPIRIT is so much harder to put our finger on, so much less concrete, so much more mysterious and like God... and still, what Jesus seems to be saying to us is that THIS IS THE REASON HES HAS COME... NOT TO STAY WITH US BUT TO HAVE

BEEN WITH US AND TO RETURN TO THE FATHER SO THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE ADVOCATE, THE HELPER, THE GUIDER, THE TEACHER THE ONE WHOM JESUS CALLED TO WALK ALONGSIDE OF US... could come.

And with Pentecost pilgrims thronging the streets and the disciples shut away with their questions behind the locked doors of an upper room, it all began to happen.

It was strange. It was awesome. It was wonderful.

A huge wind blew into town, filling the house with such force and noise that no one could even hear themselves pray. And when that wind died down, there was a cacophony of voices so loud that people all throughout the neighborhood came running, calling out to others who called out to others who called out to others, and all of them came to see the fire and hear the incredible sounds that filled the city. The promised Holy Spirit came into the hearts of the people of Jerusalem that day, speaking God's mighty deeds of power in God's language of love that was the native tongue of every single person in town, and making them a community of believers marked as God's own. And that community became the new church, the Body of Christ in the world. Wow!

What do you think of when you think of church? Our culture tends to describe church as a place to go, a place where people go to get their spiritual needs met. That sort of thinking is consistent with many of our culture's individualistic values, and while it won't make for real Christian community, it does make sense to many who find themselves in the "spiritual but not religious" crowd. We often hear the self-proclaimed "spiritual but not religious" people disparaging church in favor of finding God on the golf course or in the mountains or where ever they happen to be on Sunday morning. The quintessential example is a woman named Sheila who is famous among seminarians, because we all had to read about her in Robert Bellah's book, *Habits of the Heart*, a classic study of religion in America.

"I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. [Apparently in our culture it's necessary to state aloud that belief in God does not equate to being crazy.] "I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's called Sheilism. Just my own little voice. It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other." ¹

While I am quite sure that God wants us to take care of each other, what we need to remember is when we allow our faith to stand alone, we run the risk of listening for "our own little voice" rather than the voice of God. We hear God's voice as individuals, yes. But we must listen for God in community in order to hear the myriad ways God wants to speak to us.

¹ Bellah, Robert, and Richard Madsen. 1996. *Habits of the Heart*, University of California Press. 221.

When God's Holy Spirit came among God's people, the Spirit came into community, and made even more community. That little church went from 120 people to 3,000 in just one day, and people who thought their story was over when Jesus told them he was returning to his Father, realized that their story was really just beginning.

Empowered by God's Holy Spirit, they would now be the Body of Christ in the world. **They weren't trying to grow their church, they were trying to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. They were trying to do God's work in the world.** Through their own hearts to love and hands to work, the love of Jesus would continue to show itself. **That's what they were about.**

Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans and they received the Holy Spirit. Paul laid his hands on the Corinthians and the Holy Spirit came upon them too. Peter preached to the Gentiles and the Holy Spirit fell upon every single one of them. Pentecost isn't something that happened only once, and a long time ago. Pentecost happens over and over and over again. It happens each time we speak words of love and mercy, each time we offer kindness, each time we share who we are and what we have. At that first century Pentecost and in every little Pentecost since then, God's Holy Spirit comes into us, birthing God into the world again - not in one body, but in the body that is all of the believers. You see, our God is not satisfied to stand at a distance. Our God loves us too much for that. God's deepest desire is to live in us and for us to live in God.

God's Holy Spirit comes among us not only to remind us and teach us, but also to make Jesus present to us and in us, here and now. God's Holy Spirit makes the incarnation permanent, filling us with the God who speaks in everyone's language because God's is the language of love. That same Spirit that enlivened Jesus, that united him with God and poured God's love into the world has come to live in us too. There are stories of God's Holy Spirit everywhere, and the poet Naomi Shihab Nye tells one of my favorites...

Wandering around in the Albuquerque airport

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours, she says, I heard the announcement:

If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well -- one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly. Shu dow-a, shu- biduck habibtj, stani stani schway, min fadlick, Sho bit se-wee?

The minute she heard any words she knew -- however poorly used -- she stopped crying. She thought our flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day. I said no, no, we're fine, you'll get there, just late,

Who is picking you up? Let's call him and tell him. We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her -- Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends.

Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies -- little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts -- out of her bag -- and was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a Sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from Laredo -- we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers -- Non-alcoholic -- and the two little girls for our flight, one African American, one Mexican American -- ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar too.

And I noticed my new best friend -- by now we were holding hands -- Had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.

Not a single person in this gate -- once the crying of confusion stopped -- has seemed apprehensive about any other person.

*They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.*²

What the poet describes is the world which God has made, and continues to make, day by day. This is the world Pentecost makes possible, a world where everyone hears in the language of love. It's the voice of Jesus, present with us and in us through the power of the Holy Spirit in a shared community where one of us is reaching out to another and she reaches out to another and he reaches out to another and another and another, and all of us teaching and learning and feeding and welcoming and praying and sharing and comforting and visiting and serving and blessing and loving. This is what we were made for. Come Holy Spirit, come. Amen

² Naomi Shihab Nye, *Gate A-4*