

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

Pentecost B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
May 19, 2024
The Rev. Karen Haig

*Come Holy Spirit, our souls inspire. Enlighten us with your celestial fire. For if you are with us then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us then nothing else matters. Be with us, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen*¹

As many of you know, the people of the diocese of Olympia, the Episcopal church in Western Washington, gathered yesterday at our cathedral to elect a new bishop. There is something wonderful about any gathering of the diocese, when the church comes together in its many forms, but yesterday's gathering was particularly special. It took four ballots and well over four hours to complete our work. It was good work. It was exhausting work. It was prayerful work. And it was, without question, the work of the Holy Spirit. For those of us in the cathedral, the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable. And when we finally got to see Bishop-elect Phil on zoom, he spoke to us of the presence of God's Holy Spirit in every step of his journey to us.

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit blew into Jerusalem, filling the faithful with God's presence. Pentecost means 50th. For us it's the 50th day after Easter, but Pentecost existed long before Jesus' resurrection. The Pentecost pilgrims who filled the streets in Jerusalem some two thousand years ago had come to celebrate Shavuot, the festival of weeks, a festival that falls fifty days after Passover and celebrates God's gift of the Torah. Many faithful Jews traveled day and night to get to Jerusalem for this festival, bringing with them offerings of the first fruits of their labor. People came from everywhere, and as you might imagine, it was chaotic! People with different customs, different clothing, different ideals, ideas and languages all converged in Jerusalem for a festival they thought would be like every other Shavuot they'd been to. But this year, Jerusalem was in an upheaval. Political and religious tensions were running high. And the disciples? They were safely tucked away in an upstairs room.

Then suddenly a huge wind blew in filling the whole city 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 city came running, calling out to others who called out to others who called out to others, and all of them running to see the tongues that looked like fire and to hear of the wonderful works of God told to each one of them in their own mother tongue. People from every nation under heaven heard those disciples speaking as if God's reconciling and redemptive story was just for them. And it was.

¹ From a prayer by Barbara Brown Taylor

The Holy Spirit Jesus had breathed into the disciples on that last night before he died, came into the hearts of thousands of people in Jerusalem that day, speaking God's mighty deeds of power in God's language of love – the language that is everyone's mother tongue. It was the language of love that made them a community of believers marked as God's own, the community that became the new church, the Body of Christ in the world. When God's Holy Spirit came into God's people, that Spirit came into community, making even more community. We're told that little church went from something over one hundred people to more than three thousand in just one day, and the disciples who had thought their story was over when Jesus told them he was returning to his Father, realized their story had just begun.

Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans and they received the Holy Spirit.
Paul laid hands on the Corinthians and the Holy Spirit came into them too.
Peter preached to the Gentiles and the Holy Spirit came into every single one of them.
And in just a few minutes I will lay hands on Ruby, Graysen, Stephanie and Coby, sealing them by the Holy Spirit and marking them as Christ's own, forever.

So you see, Pentecost isn't something that happened only once, and a long time ago. Pentecost happens over and over and over again. Because we've been given the gift of God's Holy Spirit, Pentecost 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. Filled with God's Holy Spirit we are the ones to bring God's love into the world again and again through the body of all the believers, the Body of Christ. God's Holy Spirit fills 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 language is the language of love. The 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...

*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 habibt, 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 a 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 Naomi Shihab Nye describes is the world God has made, and continues to make, every single 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 reaches 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*