

PENTECOST: BECOMING THE TEMPLE

or “You’re Full of ... What?” A sermon on Acts 2:1-21

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

A better title to this sermon that the Holy Spirit failed to tell me about
before I got my stuff off to Dawn might be “You’re full of ...what?” or “What are you full of?”

A repeated theme in the story from Acts is “fullness”

We start with the author, let’s call him Luke (same author as the Gospel of Luke),
introducing the story with “when the day of Pentecost had come”...

Let’s start our “that’s not what the Greek says” section right away.

Because the word used there means “filled.”

Now it is true that this was an idiom to describe time. The days were fulfilled.

But take note nonetheless because this theme of fullness comes up a few more times.

For the time to be fulfilled means something.

The Day of Pentecost is certainly filled in ways beyond simply telling us what day it is.

The idea itself of a “pentecost” is itself about fullness.

Fifty days - that’s a week of weeks - seven weeks

- seven being a number denoting perfection or completion,

- and seven times seven then must be perfection squared.

That make day fifty special as that squared completion has been filled.

Pentecost was an Old Testament festival commemorating

that time Moses went up Mount Sinai and got the Law from God,

always celebrated 50 days after Passover - the squared fullness of freedom.

As Christians, we tend to remember Pentecost more as

that time the Twelve Disciples got the Holy Spirit. So, to celebrate:

Pulpit Pounding “Get the Holy Spirit!” That was a special request from Pastor Kate.

But what does that mean? to “get the Holy Spirit?”

And can you really “get it” by being shouted at?

It’s more than just warm fuzzy feelings. It’s also more than just speaking in tongues.

And what it *means*, what it *symbolizes*, go well beyond whatever it is that happened that Pentecost.

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There are certainly some branches of Christianity that are very into the “speaking in tongues” thing. For them that is the sign that one is “truly” Christian and “has the Holy Spirit.” To others of course it sure looks like they’re spouting gibberish and are full of it, with it not being the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we can appreciate the assumption from those first century onlookers that these men were filled, not with the Holy Spirit, but with wine.

(At least in scripture here the disciples were speaking real languages that the foreign visitors to Jerusalem recognized)

Note the language used of fullness - full of new wine.

While doing some research for this sermon, looking through commentaries and prayers concerning Pentecost, there was certainly some talk of speaking in tongues, in this bringing a unity in mind and purpose of those of different languages - the reverse of the tower of Babel in a way.

Overcoming the confusion brought about from abundance of human languages that had been a punishment of human arrogance to praise God together.

That’s what I expected to be talking about, but I came across something else interesting that I wanted to share with you.

In amongst a lot of talk of the Spirit as a cleansing and sanctifying fire, I found several prayers like this gem from Saint Augustine of Hippo, North African bishop of the fourth century:

*O Holy Spirit, Love of God,
pour out your grace,
and descend plentifully into my heart.
Enlighten the dark corners of this neglected dwelling,
and scatter there your cheerful beams.
Dwell in that soul that longs to be your temple.*

Then there’s this Pentecost prayer from the seventh century:

*O God,
at this time, you sent your Holy Spirit on your apostles,
and clothed them with power from on high.
Grant that the same blessed Spirit,*

*working in and through the ministers of your Church,
may make the Word preached and the sacraments administered by them
effectual to the salvation of many souls*

and this one attributed to Saint Anselm, an eleventh century archbishop of Canterbury:

*O holy Counselor,
sweetest consolation of the sorrowful,
gracious Spirit come down now with your mighty power
into the depths of our hearts.
Gladden there with your brightness every dark retreat,
and enrich all with the dew of your abundant comfort.
Kindle our hearts with holy favor,
that the incense of our prayers and praises
may ever go up to you, our God;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.*

In these prayers, what is being emphasized is not so much the miracle of tongues. Instead, they draw parallels with a particular way God has shown up in the Old Testament in this form of wind and fire, namely in the Temple.

And these Christians from centuries past were in these prayers dedicating themselves for use as Temples, where prayers can arise as incense as it says in Psalm 141.

At the original Pentecost giving of the Law to Moses, as told in the book of Exodus, “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire.” So there is a fire connection there.

Later on, when wise King Solomon dedicates the first Temple in Jerusalem, we are told “fire came down from heaven and the glory of the Lord filled the Lord’s house.” (7:2) In that instance, the witnesses had a more positive response, for “when all the children of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord upon the Temple, they bowed down their faces to the earth on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord.” (7:3)

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The dedication of the second Temple wasn't accompanied by the same sort of divine splendor. Indeed, because of this it seems there were some Jews, albeit a minority, that doubted or even denied that the rebuilt Temple was legitimate.

Think about what it might mean then for God to show up in this same manner of wind and flame, on the Day of Pentecost. Whether or not the Second Temple was the dwelling place of God on earth may have been a question, but now it would seem indisputable that God is dwelling not just among His people, but within them.

This gets called the "indwelling of the Spirit" and is related to that odd statement in 1 Corinthians 6:19 about your very body being "the Temple of the Holy Spirit, whom you have from God."

I'm starting to understand even more clearly why this coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is called the birthday of the Church, with its similar inauguration.

Okay, so what does any of this have to do with us? I don't think I've ever had something like a tongue of fire land on my head - unless you count ones made of tissue paper that made one year in Sunday School. The tissue paper did not give me the ability to speak in tongues I'm afraid. Maybe I'm alone in that and you all have had such dramatic experiences with the Holy Spirit, but individual results vary.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit itself can mean different things. 1 Corinthians 12:4 and onwards says that "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served." It goes on to explain how some have wisdom, some knowledge, some faith, healing, miracle-working, speaking, discernment, etc.

Not having the wind and flames does not mean the Holy Spirit isn't working in and through us. Based on my experiences in this church with you all, I'm pretty sure the Holy Spirit is alive and well and abiding with us still. It might be useful to remember that the Pentecost we read about in Acts of the Apostles happened once.

And even that second Temple that I mentioned some Jews doubted, because they didn't see the cloud and fire, most revered it anyway as the place God mystically dwells among his people.

And that is what the church is now.
And I'm not talking about the building.
In those prayers I read to you,
this dynamic is presented as internalized in each person.
Christ was uniquely a locus of God on earth,
God joined to humanity in fact, if you believe what Christians have believed for two thousand years.
Being joined to him through baptism,
being part of the Church - sometime's called the Body of Christ -
that's our role now.
It is through us that God often acts,
including us in His saving work,
and become in some respects that place where God and his creation are united.

It is an incredible gift from God, being made into something so special.
I think it is worth reflecting on how special it is to be the church together,
and the personal opportunity to ourselves function as Temples
and have God work through us
even as we offer sacrifices of prayer, thanksgiving
- even if what we have is a broken spirit, Psalm 51 tells us that
"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart,
O God, thou wilt not despise."
Something deeply personal,
yet something that brings people together,
even despite themselves,
for God has shown that confusion and disunity can be overcome.
Even death and dryness as we saw in the Ezekiel reading.
God does amazing things, and chooses us to be a part of it.

*Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.*