

I am always amused by the fact that on the day that the Church was “born” everyone thought its’ members were drunk! Clearly there was such a commotion made after the Holy Spirit descended that Jesus’ followers were thought to have been drinking “new wine” as some observers said with a sneer. And it’s no wonder why they thought that: they had seen visions of tongues of fire and people from other nations were preaching in languages not their own. But the detractor's words are somewhat ironic, if not prophetic, because indeed, this experience resembled that of “new wine” in a number of ways: it was something totally new that God was doing: filling God’s people with a potent new power and grace by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Before this particular moment of Pentecost, the Scriptures describe the Holy Spirit as being present but in a more fleeting way among God’s people and was present only with very specific people for specific tasks: upon prophets or those chosen for a specific duty temporarily. As the Psalmist wrote, “Take not your Holy Spirit from me.” But at the moment of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out in a new way upon everyone. And I mean everyone, as Peter describes: men and women, slave and free, old and young, anyone who “called upon the name of the Lord” was given the Holy Spirit. And so it is today.

The Greek word “pentecost” merely means “50” and represents the fact that this day occurs 50 days after Easter, but Pentecost is a Jewish Festival, the Festival of Weeks or First Fruits for the new grain harvest called “Shavuot” and the day commemorates the giving of the 10 Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. This festival had been observed for millennia but when the early followers of Jesus gathered for the celebration of Shavuot, or Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago, something new happened. It is described this way: “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house.... Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each.... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” In both Jewish and Christian tradition this day of Pentecost or Shavuot represents a day when humans had a very tangible

and spiritual encounter with God. In Moses’ day it was the giving of God’s Law on stone tablets and in the apostle’s day it was the giving of God’s Spirit- the Law now being written on human hearts, echoing the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” (*Jeremiah 31:33*) and in Ezekiel: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you....I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.” (*Ezekiel 36:26-27.*)

The apostle’s saw tongues of fire – fire signifying God’s Spirit and presence on Pentecost. (It’s why we wear red today.) Moses also witnessed fire and smoke on Mt. Sinai when God revealed the 10 commandments. Fire revealed God’s presence in each case. Yesterday during Bishop Curry’s sermon at the Royal Wedding he said, “The advances of science and technology are greatly dependent on the human ability and capacity to take fire and use it for human good”, noting that it was “controlled fire in a plane” that got him across the Atlantic Ocean. Fire is an important symbol of God’s power in Scripture. And immediately following this vision of fire we read that disciples were filled with the Spirit and began speaking God’s Word in many languages. According to Jewish tradition, the giving of the 10 commandments was also accompanied by the speaking of many languages: Rabi Yochanan writes: “*When God’s voice came forth at Mt. Sinai, it divided itself into 70 human languages so that the whole world might understand it. All at Mt. Sinai, young and old, women, children, and infants according to their ability to understand.*” (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 5:9) The message of God’s plan for humanity is all inclusive and universal. It’s for all of us.

Even though it is for all of us, sometimes we, as people, use excuses not to pursue a calling, a ministry, a task or challenge by saying that we aren't good enough, don't have the gifts, are too weak, too old, too young, or *too busy*. (This list goes on, but that one’s on my list a lot.) These excuses, however, fail to recognize that the power, the fire, the energy to do whatever we face rests not just in us and our human gifts and abilities (of

which I'm sure you have many), but in God's Spirit empowering us. We do what God asks of us "with God's help." And with God, **all things are possible**. If we still doubt, just look at our lesson from Ezekiel today in which God breathes God Spirit into a valley filled with dry and dead bones in order to raise them up for the purposes of God. So, even death isn't an excuse in that text! In other words, we can count on God to empower us and to take on the challenges that confront us, no matter how daunting they may seem. That's the promise of Pentecost.

I remember well the first time I had to step into the role of being in charge of a congregation. I had been what I referred to as "the lowly associate" up to that point – it was my first parish and I had barely been ordained for about 3 years, but the Rector was retiring and the Bishop called and told me, surprisingly, in no uncertain terms, that he wanted me to become Priest in Charge of this large parish during the interim period. We had 4 Sunday services and over 1,000 people on our rolls with programs every night of the week. It was a busy place. To say I was intimidated and fearful would be an understatement. So I told the Bishop, I'm sorry, but I don't think I can do it, but he insisted it would work. "God is with you" he said.

So, I complained a lot to God in those early days. I explained to God repeatedly that I was too young and too inexperienced for that job, plus I had a brand new baby in tow. But God didn't seem to mind me and my complaints - I was baptized by fire into the role of Priest in Charge of that giant parish. Looking back, I'm glad it happened that way or I probably never would have had the courage to take on that kind of leadership role in the church. What I learned though, was that God is faithful - if and when we are or feel inadequate for the task at hand, maybe especially when we really are inadequate - God is there to help and raise us up; the Holy Spirit doesn't fail to equip us when we need it. That Spring I presented 20 people to the Bishop for confirmation and he smiled at me after the service and said, "See...I told you this would work!" I might have rolled my eyes – but God, yeah, God had been faithful.

After that I received a gift in the mail from the former Rector from that large parish: it was a stone plaque he made out of Jerusalem limestone with an old quote that Carl Jung popularized that says: "Bidden or unbidden, God is present."

My friends, Pentecost reminds us that God IS present and God's power is available to each of us. Right here, right now, even if we forget to invite God. Think about it. God's presence pervades the entire universe and at the same time, God is closer to us than our own breath. God is with us and within us.

I always like to point out that the word for the Holy Spirit in Hebrew is a feminine noun - it is the word "ruach" which means breath or wind. Envision God's very breath, breathing in you, giving you life, giving you hope, raising you up out of whatever dry place you may be in. God's fire blazes brightly and God's breath and wind emboldens us. How amazing is it that every one of us has access to God's Spirit at any moment at any time whenever we "call on the name of the Lord." When you are weak and falter, God is there, ready to lift you up. Today, this Pentecost, know that God is present and ready to fill and empower and energize you: whatever challenges, ministry, trials or tasks you face: **you are up to the challenge** because the Spirit of God is with you. Thanks be to God.