

Acts 2:1-13  
May 23, 2010

South Plains  
Pentecost

came from all over the known world speaking many different languages.

### What Does This Mean?

Pentecost is one holy day that the church has all to herself. At Christmas, Jesus shares center stage with Santa Claus. Easter points to springtime and new clothes every bit as much as it points to the resurrection of Jesus. The Day of Pentecost, however, has kept its Judeo Christian origins intact. I've yet to see a Pentecost tent sale.

Nevertheless, the celebration of Pentecost among the people of God has changed over the centuries. In Old Testament times, Pentecost, which literally means "fifty," marked the fiftieth day after the barley harvest began. For the Jews, it was a day of thanksgiving for the blessings of the harvest. Later on, Pentecost evolved into a thanksgiving celebration for the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, traditionally thought to have taken place fifty days after Passover. And so it happened that fifty days after Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples just before his arrest and crucifixion, the disciples were gathered together in observance of Pentecost. They were part of a huge crowd of Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the holy day. Many of those pilgrims in Jerusalem for that occasion knew little or nothing about Jesus because they lived in foreign lands. But, they traveled back to their ancestral homeland for this feast day. Like pilgrims in Jerusalem in our own time, they

The disciples of Jesus, mostly Galileans, had a double purpose for being in Jerusalem. Celebrating Pentecost was certainly one reason. The second reason was obedience to Jesus. According to Luke, the risen Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem to "wait for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4)." So there they sat waiting when they were engulfed by a violent wind. As they looked at each other in amazement, they saw tongues of fire flickering over each disciple's head. And then, filled with the Holy Spirit, each began speaking in another language, quite different from the Aramaic they had grown up with in Galilee. Soon it was apparent that these languages were not at all strange to pilgrims in the street. Jews from around the world could hear and understand the disciples of Jesus speaking about the power of God.

Every American should have the experience of traveling to a foreign country where we cannot understand the language. It's humbling to have no idea whether people are laughing about the weather or making fun of you. If you've been there, you know how quickly you welcome the sound of English and the accents of America. That's what happened to the pilgrims in Jerusalem for Pentecost. They heard poor, ignorant, unsophisticated Galileans speaking in their own tongues. "What in the world does this mean?" they wondered.

Well, there's always a cynic with a cynical explanation. "They're filled with new wine," was the first comment. Peter had a quick answer for that. "These are not drunk, as you suppose; it's only nine o'clock in the morning." Not that it's impossible to get drunk that early; but usually a nine o'clock drunk will be pretty quiet. These disciples were enunciating clearly in whatever language was spoken by Parthians, Medes, Elamites and all the rest.

Peter goes on to say that this is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy about the end times. This is the result of Jesus' resurrection. What this means is that the Spirit of God is on the loose. The risen Jesus is the Christ. Get ready for the kingdom. Now, for many of the Jews in Jerusalem that day, the experience broke the crust of their hard indifference to Jesus and his Galilean followers. Many were baptized and became followers of the way themselves. What it meant for many in Jerusalem that day was conversion.

For us, simply reading about a Pentecost that happened 2000 years ago, the experience does not seem so earth-shattering. It's another biblical curiosity. In the same way that the story about the tower of Babel "explains" the existence of a world with many different languages, the story of Pentecost "explains" the existence of the church. This is how we got started, with a whoosh of wind, flames and a miracle of

understanding. But, what does Pentecost mean for us today?

First, it means power; the power of God's Spirit is behind the work and witness of the church today. Every generation of Christians who love the church will think from time to time that the church depends on our work. If we don't do it, nobody will. It's our turn to step up to the plate. There's superficial truth in that attitude, but Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the real force enabling, redeeming, providing, restoring and fulfilling the promise of God. A young man graduating from Yale University told someone, "I want to be defined by what I give to the world." His wiser companion said, "OK. But, you can't define yourself. Look at all you have received from parents who surrounded you with opportunity and from a university that educated you. You are defined first by all you have received." If anyone asks you what kind of church is South Plains, I hope you will start by telling them about the blessings we have received and give the credit to the Holy Spirit.

Second, Pentecost means the gift of the Holy Spirit is universal, leaping over the barriers of language, nationality, race and gender. There is certainly a sense in which the Day of Pentecost began the great reversal of those divisions Genesis traces back to the tower of Babel. The various languages remain distinct, but people understand each other. Modern technology allows us to interpret a foreign language almost simultaneously with the speaker. After 2000 years, we're getting the idea

introduced in the second chapter of Acts. The church and the Spirit are for everyone.

Third, Pentecost means that you and I are included in the gift-giving. I suppose every public school has a gifted program for smart kids. Sometimes parents worry and wonder about their children getting into the gifted program. The kids will be tested. The program often means more work. You know the axiom: To whom much is given, much will be required. Sometimes the children are embarrassed to be singled out as smart. It can be a burden. At its best, however, a gifted program energizes a child's schooling and makes learning fun because it challenges their strengths and strengthens the areas in which they are challenged.

At our best, the church of Jesus Christ is a gifted program for all Christians. When we are baptized we are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. No one will hear a violent wind. No one will see a flame hovering above your head. You will almost surely have to study and practice in order to speak a foreign language. Nevertheless, you are gifted. Your gifts will become evident as you grow older and receive opportunities to develop those gifts. Part of the session's job is to help our members identify and mature into their gifts. The Time and Talent Survey is one instrument for doing just that. When you put a check mark beside an item on that sheet of paper, I believe you are testing the Holy Spirit, asking a question of God, "Is this what your Spirit is moving me to do?" The way to find out is to try.

Keep a couple of things in mind as you fill out the Survey. Remember that everyone has something to offer. That's the promise of Pentecost reaffirmed over and over in scripture. Moses thought he couldn't speak in public, but God made him the Lawgiver. Jesse was certain his youngest was too young to be of use, but Samuel anointed him as King David. Your primary spiritual gift may be used in your job or in your responsibilities at home. It may come out in community service. We hope one or more of your gifts will be exercised at church. Wherever you give yourself, remember that the Holy Spirit is the root of the best you have to offer to the babies in the nursery or to your employer or to God's work anywhere.

God doesn't call the powerful. God empowers those who are called. This is God calling.

Especially when we are exercising gifts in the church, it's also good to keep in mind that "spiritual gifts" are not personal in an individual sense. Even charismatic gifts are not for our personal aggrandizement. All gifts of the Holy Spirit are community building gifts. Unless they are building love, kindness, generosity, compassion, and healing relationships, they are not gifts at all. Pentecost fostered communication. It was an explosion of talent that sent backwards Galileans into the whole Roman Empire. It turned the band of disciples inside out, connecting them with the world. Your gifts and mine need to turn outward.

We need to open ourselves to the presence of the Holy Spirit, to the power of God at work in the world and within us. What does this mean? This means life, the gift of life for you, for the church and for the world Christ gave himself to save.