

BAPTISM BY FIRE

NUMBERS 11:24-30

ACTS 2:1-21

PENTECOST 2017

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THE CHURCH TAKES US ON SEVERAL STORY JOURNEYS THROUGHOUT ITS YEAR.

One such journey has now come to an end. It began back March. She has taken us from Ash Wednesday through Good Friday and Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday, or to put it another way, from ashes to fire. The story began with the origin of Jesus' ministry and ends with the origin of ours. Of course, this ending, like lots of endings, is but the beginning to yet another story.

LUKE TELLS THE STORY OF THAT FIERY DAY IN JERUSALEM IN DRAMATIC FASHION.

About 120 people who had followed Jesus around during his earthly ministry are gathered in a rented room in Jerusalem. Some are ardent disciples, some are family, and some are of the

“I believe, Lord, help my unbelief” variety with whom we can identify so strongly.

Outside the locked doors a huge celebration is going on. It is the Feast of Weeks, and Jews from all over the empire have come to the Holy City to celebrate. Like many of Israel’s celebrations, Weeks had a double focus. It was a harvest festival celebrating the first fruits of the grain harvest. It also celebrated the giving of God’s Divine Instruction on Mount Sinai...as such the focus would have been on the mission God had given Israel to be a light to the nations, to teach them the ways of the Lord. Those in the upper room, however, were not participating, they were waiting for what Jesus had called “power from on high” to descend upon them.

AND COME IT DID.

Those who were there described what happened: “At first we heard the roaring of a wind, a wind so strong we thought it would tear the roof off. The wind stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Then a ball of fire entered the room; it seemed to come out of nowhere. It was as if all heaven had broken loose. But then a strange thing happened. The ball of fire divided into what we can only describe as small tongues, and one tongue hovered over each of us. Each tongue of fire seemed to give the ability to

speaking in a tongue other than our own. We all started talking at once, and it got so loud and confusing that we couldn't stand being confined in that room. We tumbled down the stairs and spilled out into the street. We must say we sounded so rowdy that those celebrating Weeks thought we had just come from a party to which they had not been invited... a party at which too much new wine had been served. Fortunately Peter, never at a loss for words in any language, set them straight. We had not been overcome by spirits, but by the Holy Spirit.

AND THERE YOU HAVE IT.

Luke's account of how the Church of Jesus Christ began, a description of our roots if you will. So what is it that Luke stresses in this story?

- He first stresses that the Church is the work of God. It is God's creation just as sure as you and I are. The Church is important because God thinks it's important.
- He stresses the unity of those gathered that day. "They were all together in one place" Luke tells us. They all shared the tongues of fire and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They all began to speak in a foreign tongue. Later Luke will

tell us that they formed a community in which they were all of one heart and soul.

- Next he tells us that they all had the gift of prophecy, as Joel of old had foretold.
 - They were able to see God's acts of power both in the past and in the present.
 - They were able to understand what God was about, what His purpose was.
 - They were able to make that purpose clear, even to people who didn't speak the same language.
 - And finally they were able understood the significance of Jesus' teachings, his death, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven.
- Luke tells us that out of their oneness and their prophetic ability, they were able to preach the Gospel to those who were very different from them in language, customs, and even religious beliefs. This is to say, they were able to call very diverse people into their community which was unified by its belief about God and the gift of salvation found in Jesus Christ. They were thus able to be that light to the nations...as Isaiah long ago had called God's people to be.
- And finally, they were able to see that in this act God was reversing the curse of the tower builders. Now language was not a barrier. Now God's people would indeed scatter to the

ends of the earth and be God's ambassadors as humankind was to have been from the beginning.

**THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH CELEBRATING
PENTECOST EACH YEAR NOW BECOMES CLEAR.**

Pentecost reminds us of our roots, reminds us of who we are, and what we are to be about. Does the modern church need this reminder? I think so. A few years back I read a Sunday Doonesbury cartoon. In it, the Episcopal Vicar is describing his congregation to the strip's principal character Mike Doonesbury. The dialogue went like this:

"It's an interesting congregation, Mike. Members are much more consumer-conscious than they used to be. The church has to deliver for them: counseling, social events, recovery programs, a fitness center...we have it all".

"Where's God fit into all of this?" Mike asks.

"God? Well God's still the big draw for sure. He's got the big Name".

"But do you evoke it anymore?" Mike wonders.

"Uh, frankly, Mike, God comes with a lot of baggage..."

As is often the case with Doonesbury's satire, it hits the nail on the head. At times churches give the impression of being little more than a spiritual shopping mall or on-line catalogue of products and services to satisfy the discerning spiritual customer.

Many sermons sound more like Rotary talks or self-help lectures filled with the latest psycho-jargon than they do proclamations of the Gospel.

Some churches seem more interested in providing social service activities or entertaining programs than in providing for worship of the Living God.

Many members have forgotten why we gather on Sunday and what it is the church has to say that no one else can say...forgotten what the church is called to do that no one else is called to do.

This is why the church reminds us of our roots each Pentecost Sunday. It is her way of setting us once again on our proper path.

PETER'S PENTECOST SERMON MAKES ALL THIS CLEAR.

God's overriding purpose is to redeem His creation. Through Jesus Christ, God is offering salvation to the whole wide world. **The church exists to proclaim that salvation.** This is why we are here. This is what we must be about.

Peter's sermon also makes other things clear about this mission. There will be many obstacles to proclaiming God's offer of salvation to all. Some are more easily overcome than others. The language barriers for example have been overcome since that very first day. They continue to be overcome as missionaries go out to the ends of the earth, equipped with the ability to speak the language of the people to whom they come. These missionaries come equipped with Bibles translated into almost every known tongue on earth and a knowledge of the customs of the people to whom they bring the Gospel.

Other barriers, however, are harder to overcome. The principal one being the tendency of the self to remain locked behind closed doors, minding its own business, licking its own wounds, and tending to its own needs.

If Christmas reminds us that we are not alone, that God has come down from heaven to save us, then Pentecost reminds us that we are not our own, that we exist to proclaim the Good News

that God has come down to save us. This is news too good to keep to ourselves. This is news God mandates that we spread throughout the world. On this Pentecost Sunday, May God give us the fire to spend the rest of our lives in that service.