

Community Church of Issaquah
Sunday, May 19, 2024

The Meaning of Pentecost

Rev. Vincent Lachina

In my younger years as a Baptist, there was much about other churches that I knew nothing about. Life was simple in my Southern Baptist Church. There was Easter and Christmas, and each was marked with a special offering. The Annie Armstrong Easter offering was designated for the Home Mission Board and Lottie Moon Christmas offering was dedicated for use at the Foreign Mission Board. Ironically, each was named for a woman in a denomination that does not have women in leadership positions.

As a Catholic in my earliest years, I paid no attention to the changing of the church calendar which was indicated by the colors worn by the priest and the elaborate decorations of the altar and sanctuary. It was only as I became familiar with clergy from a host of different denominations that this thing called “the liturgical calendar” became familiar to me. Each year at the beginning of the church year (that’s September, not January), I would look at each month carefully and see if there was something I should be vitally aware of in planning a church service. I didn’t pay too much attention to notes about certain Sundays which read things like “Seventh Sunday After Easter.” It would have been difficult for me to prepare a sermon that focused on that theme, so those were ignored.

As American Baptists, we limit ourselves to specific holidays or observances that are a part of the larger liturgical calendar. Advent, Lent, and the Sundays that fall in those Religious Seasons are generally the center of our calendars. Today a special Sunday appeared on our church calendar, and it's called Pentecost Sunday. Don't tell anyone, but this Pentecost Sunday is also the seventh Sunday after Easter. It has an unusual origin and celebration that will be the focus of my message today.

The term Pentecost comes from the Greek word for "fiftieth" (50th). It refers to the festival celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover, also known as the "Feast of Weeks." In the Jewish tradition, Pentecost was celebrated for centuries as noted in the Old Testament. It was called the Feast of Harvest or the Feast of Weeks in that tradition. It is mentioned in each of the first five books of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Pentecost is referred to in the Book of Acts, Chapter 2, (the passage that was read for us earlier), as the time the Holy Spirit intervened following Jesus' ascension to heaven.

In the Old Testament days of the Jewish world, Pentecost was the celebration of the beginning of the early weeks of harvest. For the Jews, there were two harvests every year. The first, or early harvest came during the months of May or June. The final harvest came in the Fall. Pentecost was the celebration of the beginning of the early harvest, which meant that Pentecost always fell in the middle of May or early June. There were other celebrations or observances that took place before Pentecost. Those included Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of First

Fruits. To determine when Pentecost occurred, you could count off 50 days from Passover, and the fiftieth day would be the Day of Pentecost. Since there were 50 days, this also meant 7 weeks, thus, Pentecost was also called the Feast of Weeks.

As Christians, this history of Pentecost's origin has nothing to do with how and why we observe this Sunday. For us, we honor it as the day when the Holy Spirit came to the Church. As we heard in the passage for Acts, Jesus followers had gathered to celebrate the Feast of Harvest or Pentecost. The times were difficult for those who were believers and had followed Jesus. The days of seeing Jesus live and in person were gone. Even when he had come back from the dead, the days of being with him were few before he ascended into heaven and disappeared. Followers no longer had a human figure to follow and believe in or worship. They had moved back to their old way of life – believing in what they could not see.

But as faithful followers of their Jewish traditions, many had gathered in the church to celebrate this Feast of Harvest or Pentecost. As they sat there, the Holy Spirit filled the entire church, and all of them were filled with that Holy Spirit. It was such a powerful moment that all of them began to speak in other languages from many other countries which they did not know as the Holy Spirit enabled them. It was such a strange happening that many others were drawn to this gathering to see what was going on. As they gathered, Peter stood up and began to preach to them, telling them of their need to repent and accept

Jesus Christ as their Savior. Acts records that the church grew by 3000 people as a result of that one event.

Different churches observe Pentecost in different ways. Perhaps you are likely aware of one denomination or branch of Christianity who are called Pentecostals. Their origin is traced to the first coming of the Holy Spirit and the speaking in tongues, which they practice today. If you have ever visited a Pentecostal Church, you might have heard one or more of the congregants speaking in what we would term a different language. For other Christians, like us, it is somewhat different.

The prophecy of the coming of the Holy Spirit can be traced back to Old Testament times. Joel 2:28-29 speaks of it this way:

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

In the Gospel of John 14:26, Jesus promises that there would be a Holy Spirit who would be a helper for those who followed Christ. Jesus says,

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”

The fulfilment of this very prophecy at this Pentecost celebration had an even more significant impact on the disciples and apostles.

Biblical scholar John Gill describes it this way:

“Through this baptism of the Holy Ghost (or Spirit) and fire, the apostles became more knowing, and had a greater understanding of the mysteries of the Gospel, and were more qualified to preach it to the people of all nations and languages.”

At the center of this experience is the fact that Pentecost was the moment in our faith that after Jesus had ascended back into heaven, God gave believers a Heavenly Helper, the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told his followers several times that he would leave in compliance with God’s wish for him. But he also repeatedly told those who followed him that he would send them the promised comforter, the Holy Spirit. And it was at that moment in the Pentecost celebration with the coming of the Holy Spirit that his promise was fulfilled.

It was at that moment when the Holy Spirit and fire descended that the words Jesus had often spoken became reality. It was also at that time that those attending the celebration were empowered as believers. This is especially true for those apostles who were left after Jesus’s ascent into heaven, notably Peter, whose lives and ministries were changed dramatically. Those who were in attendance and heard the many languages of some who began to tell of the wonderful works of God and Christ realized that they were empowered to be witnesses. Many were amazed asking “What does all this mean?” And some who did not believe began to make fun of those witnessing, saying “They are filled with new wine.”

Who were the people gathered that day? The thousands there was fulfilling the requirements of their Jewish faith. Pentecost was a pilgrim festival, meaning that all adult Jewish men were required to come from wherever they lived to Jerusalem and be in attendance in person during the celebration. It was the perfect day for the fulfilment of the prophecy and the perfect day for the lead disciple to host an evangelical service.

So, there was Peter standing up before this huge crowd of people, perhaps in the thousands or ten thousands, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of a Hebrew or Jewish celebration of Pentecost. Many who heard, believed the message and became followers of Christ. Acts says that number was 3000, but it could be more. It is often said that it was at this moment when the Church was born. Suddenly with the coming of God's Holy Spirit, that transformation of so many in the crowd changed Pentecost forever. The message then is the message today: the Holy Spirit is here for us as a Comforter and Helper.

Christ had given his life and was resurrected, and then had left this earth to join His Father in heaven. But we would not be left in a void waiting for Jesus to reappear. God kept His promise. Jesus kept his promise. At that moment in the middle of a Hebrew celebration, it happened. The Holy Spirit came then and is here now. So, what does Pentecost mean to us today? Pentecost marks for us the arrival of God's Holy Spirit who is in our hearts and at the center of our daily life as a Christian. God would not ever leave us without a Comforter or Helper. For that reason

alone, He sent the Holy Spirit to be our caretaker and guardian. It is that Holy Spirit that hears our prayers, who gives us guidance for living a faithful life, and who works to keep us focused on the words that Jesus left us to live by. Pentecost. That's why we honor this day. Because God's presence is always in our lives by the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. God kept his promise, and we are the recipients of his gift of his Holy Spirit. That's the meaning of Pentecost.