

Happy Birthday, Church

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Last Sunday, many churches celebrated the festival of Pentecost, the third of three major festivals in the life of the church. We know about Easter and Christmas, but Pentecost doesn't get much play. You won't find Pentecost cards at Hallmark. You won't see any bright Pentecost decorations on houses. There are no Pentecost plants like Christmas trees or Easter lilies. I didn't get any Pentecost presents. Pentecost goes largely unnoticed.

So, what is Pentecost? It's the fiftieth day of the Easter season, as indicated by its name, which comes from the Greek word for "fiftieth." For seven full weeks (seven is the Biblical number for fullness or wholeness), Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus in the season of Easter. It finds its fulfillment in Pentecost when we receive the gift of God's holy Spirit to empower faithful followers of Jesus to live as gospel messengers in the world.

Pentecost has its roots in the ancient Jewish pilgrimage festival of Shavuot (pronounced "sha-voo-OAT"). Also known as the Festival of Weeks, it comes fifty days after Passover, the central festival of Judaism. In this harvest festival (Deuteronomy 16), ancient Israel celebrated God's blessing in the harvest, and remembered their identity as a people whom God had freed from slavery.

For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the gift of God's holy Spirit. In Greek, the word "spirit" is related to breath and wind. On this day, God breathes life into the church. The church is inspired (also related to spirit) by God's passion and love for the world.

The story is found in Acts 2. The community of early disciples has gathered to mark Shavuot. Luke imagines a strong wind blowing through that upper room. In this spectacular and chaotic scene, these early disciples rush into the streets to proclaim the good news of the power of God's life. They were so enthusiastic and full of life that bystanders dismiss them as a group of drunkards, even so early in the day. The bystanders are dazzled by this scene playing out in front of them and wonder what's going on.

But they are not drunk. Peter preaches one of the earliest sermons of the early church. He tells the story of how they followed Jesus. He explains that Jesus was arrested, put on trial, and executed as a common criminal. Slowly, they had come to understand that Jesus' death was not the last word, that God raised him from the dead, and now God's spirit is freely available to all people. God is breathing new life into the world.

The church was born, which is why many churches celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church. Happy Birthday, Church!

Filled with spirit, these early disciples can't hold the good news in. Luke's story pictures these poor, illiterate peasants "speaking in other languages," proclaiming the good news of God's love. Jews from every corner of the known world who had come to Jerusalem were hearing the story of Jesus in their own language. Imagine it as an international conference with simultaneous translation, each delegate hearing in their headset the speeches of other delegates. Luke wants us to know that this story is so important for the life of the world that it is available for everyone to hear.

The story ends with a sense of togetherness and unity, of empowerment and courage. As Peter preaches it, this is the dawn of God's life and love breaking in on the world. Early in his

ministry, Jesus had claimed that God's spirit was inspiring him "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free." (Luke 4) Pentecost is the fulfillment of Jesus' ministry. Now the church is given the same mission. God's spirit inspires the church. God's jubilee is breaking open in the world, and the church can proclaim and live out this gift of good news for all people. It is a gospel message of healing, liberation, and joy.

Because of this origin story, Pentecost is a perfect time to reflect on the ministry of the church. One of the blogs I read regularly describes the church as a "dynamic community of people following Jesus, empowered by holy Spirit to carry out God's mission of healing, liberation, and joy for the sake of the world."

We are living in a world which desperately needs to hear about unity and courage, healing, and liberation. Our world has become sad in the last little while. There is little joy. It is divided, angry, and fearful. There seems to be little energy for renewal and unity.

The church which was born on Pentecost can step into this void. That same blog reminds us that "at its heart, the church is God's mission, the adventurous challenge of understanding and connecting with neighbours far and near." Faithful people can be a force for good, a powerful voice of healing and unity in this fractured world. We can bring people together, proclaim good news, live in peace, unify diverse communities, and treat all people with equal dignity and equal justice. We can be a force of healing and hope in the world.

Like the early church, God invites us to become a community of bridge-builders as we reach out in love and compassion to bring people together. We can be visionaries and dreamers, fostering a world marked by the dream of God for unity, love, cohesion, hope, and healing.

The contemporary church is God's mission in the world. God has breathed life and love into us, and we can live as people who embody God's hope for the world. God breathes life and renewal into the world, division is transformed into unity, and fear is broken apart by the power of God's love.

So happy birthday, church. We can live as God's mission of grace, life, and love.