

Pentecost Then

A reflection preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
June 8, 2014 Pentecost
by Carol Penner
Text: Acts 2:1-13

I can't explain what happened that day. There was the sound of a mighty wind; it wasn't a wind, it was the **sound** of a mighty wind, tongues of flame resting over each person, but it was not fire. People speaking many languages, but they didn't know those languages. It all happens the day the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to the Christian community.

It's not explainable, but other unexplainable things happened in Jewish history. The day the gift of the Law was given, Moses went up Mt. Sinai. The earth trembled, there was thunder and smoke, and when Moses came down the mountain, his face was shining. There were amazing signs around the giving of the gift of the law.

That gift of the Law is something the Jewish people celebrated every year on the festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost. They still celebrate that gift! I was in Israel a few years ago during the festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost. Then and now, it was and is a pilgrimage festival, people come from all over the world to be in Jerusalem on that day.

We were staying in the Old City of Jerusalem on Pentecost, and we walked at sunset to the Temple Mount. Thousands of Jews were gathered there, and just when we thought no more people could fit in the square, more and more poured in! There was a feeling of great joy and excitement. All the thousands of students from the different schools that taught the Torah started arriving, joined arm in arm, with the person at the front of their procession carrying the Torah high, and they were all dancing and singing. God has given us the gift of the Law! And they stayed up all night dancing and singing and reading scripture for everyone to hear.

It was remarkable to me that it was such a public celebration...this wasn't just something that happened in people's living rooms, and in the privacy of their synagogues. Their joy was so great they came pouring out onto the streets.

There was that kind of celebration going on in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost...people were happy, gathered together from many corners of the world, celebrating in the streets of Jerusalem.

The scripture passage we read today from the book of Acts tells us that the followers of Jesus were gathered together, as Jews they would have been celebrating the great gift of the law. Yet they were waiting for another gift. Jesus had told them to wait for the Spirit, an Advocate that would give them power. They were being obedient, they were joined together in prayer and around nine o'clock in the morning there was the sound of the wind that was not a wind, and the flames that were not fire,

and the speaking of languages that were not known. And the gift of the Holy Spirit was given. It was a joyful event, the giving of a great gift.

Like the other people gathered for Pentecost, the joy they have cannot be contained, they go outside to share it. Large numbers of people start hearing them. Peter gives an impassioned speech about Jesus to the people gathered, and they are struck to the heart by his words and three thousand people become Christians on that day.

We talk about the Holy Spirit as a gift. When we think of gift, we think of something valuable and precious that you get to have and hold. We desire the gifts of the Spirit...who wouldn't want love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, temperance, faith. Sometimes we think of the Holy Spirit as closeness to God, if we have the Spirit, we'll feel so great, so happy because we are close to God.

We think about the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we think, I'd like to have that!

But the gift of the Holy Spirit is not a gift that was meant to be held as a possession. Peter, James and John and Mary and all the rest could not just treasure this gift and go back to fishing or living in Cana, and enjoying this gift for the rest of their lives.

The Holy Spirit was not a personal gift to be possessed. It was a different kind of gift. It was a gift for the world, and it flowed through the disciples.

The writer of the Acts of Apostles doesn't tell us how the disciples felt having the Holy Spirit, whether they were happy or excited, which gives us a clue that the feeling is not so important. Instead we are told what happens. Filled with the Spirit, they GO, they go outside; they can't stop sharing the good news of Jesus. The Holy Spirit flings them into the world, and they never return home. Tradition has it that all but one of the disciples is martyred for their faith. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they are the gift that keeps on giving, until their lives are over.

If you ever hear a story that begins with the words, "They were filled with the Holy Spirit" in this world that story will not end with "and they lived happily ever after". The Holy Spirit is not that kind of a gift. It's not a gift that makes people happy. It's a gift that makes people faithful. "They were filled with the Holy Spirit" is followed by of "take up your cross and follow me."

I think it's significant that the Spirit came with something like wind and something like fire. Picture wind and fire together...you know where that leads. It's a picture of something uncontrollable and wild. And that's what happens there on that first day. Peter says words that catch fire in people's hearts; they spread like the wind, the good news moving with speed from person to person, from country to country. The Spirit of God leading us into all truth, a fire of love that will consume us.

The disciples were waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit early on Pentecost morning...they were gathered together in prayer, longing for the Spirit. We are here today on Pentecost morning, do we have the courage to ask for the Spirit...are we prepared for what the Spirit can do in us and through us?