

Sermon, *God as Source of Love*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels by the Sea, Pentecost Sunday 5.19.24

Happy Pentecost Sunday! You all look good in red. Thank you for coming out this morning and looking like flames of fire.

I have some questions about Pentecost, and I thought maybe you do too. First, what does Pentecost mean? It means fifty. That's it. Nothing special, just fifty. Why then is it a special day? Why did the Gospel writer (and writer of the Book of Acts) Luke highlight this story – people from all over the region, with many different languages, show up on Pentecost Sunday with the disciples? Why did the Holy Spirit show up like tongues of flame? I thought there must be more to this. And there is.

Let me take you back in time. About 3,000 years ago, the Israelites were slaves in the land of Egypt. Moses led them out. It started on what is now called Passover. They were told to slaughter a lamb, put the blood on the door post before sundown (so the Angel of Death would pass-over them). They were told to eat the food – leave none for the morning. Then, when the sun rose, they took off, on foot, to the Promised Land. Pentecost is the celebration that happens every year fifty days after the Passover.

What about the tongues of fire on Pentecost? Going back to Moses; God spoke to him from a burning bush – but the bush was not being consumed by the flames! God told him to go back to Egypt and to set his people free. After the first Passover, the Israelites fled from Pharaoh's army. During the day they followed a whirlwind; at night, they were led by a pillar of fire – it was a fire that did not consume. The Bible shows both wind and flame leading people out of captivity. As recorded by Luke, the disciples were all gathered and they heard the sound of a rushing wind – whirlwind, if you will. And, they saw the tongues of fire that did not consume.

But what about Pentecost? The Fifty?

Fifty days after the Passover, Moses received the Ten Commandments. It was seven weeks plus one day. Seven is a holy number. But, the Pentecost could not happen on the Sabbath, that's a day of rest, so it happened with seven weeks plus one day – Sunday! He received the commandments on the mountain. At the top of the mountain there was flame but again, it was not a consuming flame.

We know from journals and diaries of people traveling through Jerusalem that the Pentecost was celebrated in the first century. One recording was in 64 BCE. We have Luke's writing in the Book of Acts, of around spring of 32 CE, that said Jewish people from all over were gathered on the fiftieth day. That is when the sound of the Holy Spirit was heard. The tongues of fire appeared. They could understand one another in their own native language. It all happened fifty days after Passover. So here we are too, fifty days past. Happy Pentecost!

We wear red because of the tongues of flame. When I was newly ordained, I used to pray, privately, that God would reveal to the congregation in the same manner as the Pentecost. Now, sixteen years later, I can tell you I have experienced each part of the Pentecost. First, I have

heard the sound. It sounds like a 747 taking off – not as deafening, but clearer, and it sent tingles down my spine. (It was at a healing service when many were being touched and healed by the Spirit) Second, I have seen the flames; also, at a healing conference – a different one than when I heard the sound. But I've seen the flames. They looked like a stained-glass window reflection but there was no stained glass. It was beautiful and peaceful. Lastly, many times, I have heard people slide into speaking in tongues during healing prayers. I know some Episcopalians who have the gift. Interestingly enough, I was able to understand what they were saying. (And, in case you are wondering, I have seen people supposedly slip into speaking in tongues on various YouTube videos and, well, I couldn't interpret it; nor did it sound like what I have experienced [it sounded like the same repeating vowel sounds with gibberish]. Maybe it doesn't work online. My hunch is, however, that what was captured on YouTube was perhaps not authentically of the Spirit.)

I'm telling you this to let you know that it has happened and echoes of it are still happening today. The Pentecost that Luke recorded had all those things happening at once. Plus, one more: wisdom and exhortation. Peter stood up and spoke (for the first time since he denied Jesus in Luke's account). The crowd said, "Are these not Galileans?" In the Jewish Commentary of the New Testament, it is said that the term "Galileans" was not a reference of where the disciples were from but was a condescending remark that means the "Galileans" were simpletons who did not have clear speech. Yet, on the fiftieth day, here they are speaking, clear as a bell, with wisdom beyond understanding! It's Pentecost!

The Big Deal for us today, the reason why we celebrate Pentecost; besides the tradition of doing so; is this – Love.

Jewish theology of the 1st century believed that God is unknowable. Period. Unknowable. But, what we do have is the Law. We have the prophets. We have the covenant and promises made to us by God. That's reason enough to celebrate. At the same time, however, we have this phrase: *God as...* God is unknowable but "*God as...*" is something we can relate to. The Pentecost shows us God as Source of Power – of animation, of spirit, of joy and peace and wisdom. God as source of power/wisdom/life/energy. And, for us today, Pentecost shows us God as Source of Love. When I say "love", I don't mean the difficult love of neighbor and enemy that we are commanded, no, this love is the L O V E. The love we all love. The warm fuzzy feeling that we have for one another and for God's creation. It's the love that cannot be commanded but that we find ourselves falling into. Yes, that love. And, God is the Source of Love. (Maybe that's why red is the color of Valentines Day) Pentecost shows us love and the Source of Love. This warm fuzzy love makes us do crazy things. It makes us say vows, like, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer. Love drives us to serve one another.

Some of you, upon meeting your spouse for the first time, just knew you were going to spend the rest of your life with him or her. Pentecost. Source of Love. It just hits – unexpected, undeserved. Love. And God is the The Source of it. Some of you, upon picking up a puppy or kitten just knew that you were going to be its owner. Many of you have made loving connections with pets. God is the Source of that Love too.

On Saturday, I performed another wedding. This time, for a couple from the UK in their 70's. They had been married to each other fifty years ago (there's that number again). But life stepped

in; things happened. But God, the Source of Love, also stepped in, brought them together and here they re-said their original vows to each other. Now that love is radiating from them to all of us. It's another Pentecost moment.

Our way of following God is called Love and Life. It's because of what happened, fifty days; seven weeks plus one day; after the Passover, the disciples were showed love and life. They, in their love, shared it with others and that story continues. The Church was born and continues in sharing it's love for one another and for the world. It's a place where we learn to forgive and be forgiven and to take on the hard task of loving our neighbor as ourselves. Today we remember when love came down and *God As Source Love* made love known. We too feel it in our hearts, and we hold to the promises and commitments we have made and as we reach out in love to one another.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.