

Sermon for Monday, May 16, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
is the Feast of Pentecost
the feast when we remember
the coming of the Holy Spirit
on the disciples.

The story is familiar to many of us, so familiar
that we often think we know it
and miss out on some of the details.

We normally assume
that it was the apostles who were there,
the twelve that Jesus chose minus Judas,
and plus Matthias
who had been chosen
by drawing straws
to take Judas' place.
It talks about them
standing together,
Peter
in the lead.

But if you go back to the first chapter of Acts
you discover that the early followers of Jesus included
not just the apostles
but some women, including Jesus' mother Mary and his brothers
and a bunch of others,
who met together to pray,
something like one hundred twenty of them.

And the bible isn't clear
if it was just the apostles
or all of them
who were there that day that we remember this day.

And then there's the setting.
It seems they were gathered in a house —
but it probably wasn't a house like we know it.
Most houses in the time of Jesus
had very small rooms.
It was a matter of construction —
the width of a room was limited
by the length of the beams used for the ceiling,
and long beams
would have been very expensive.
So houses tended to have a bunch of small rooms,
all clustered around a central courtyard.
That courtyard was important, because the rooms tended to be very dark,
so you needed somewhere to gather
and to do those tasks
that required light.
And to add to the space that had light,
they used the rooftops —
they still do in Jerusalem today —
they used the rooftops
as additional living space,
usually shaded
by an awning.

And so when we think about the story of Pentecost
they probably weren't gathered inside — there simply wouldn't be enough room.
They would be in the courtyard
or on the roof.
I suspect the latter;
as the story goes on,
we read that people could hear the disciples' voices
speaking in other languages,
and Peter began to preach to them,
and the roof
would be the obvious place for that all to happen,
a kind of makeshift stage.

And so there they are,
the apostles, and likely a bunch of others
of Jesus' followers,

up on the roof,
and the passers-by
know nothing until
they feel a gust of wind,
unexpected
in the crowded city,
and they look up to see if a storm is coming,
and instead, over the edge of the roof,
they see something like flames dancing,
and then come the voices,
disembodied,
a sudden hubbub.

And a Roman soldier hears a snippet of Latin,
and stops, and listens,
and hears the story of Jesus
in his own language.
And a Macedonian merchant
hears a few words of Greek,
and pauses in his journey.
And there's an Ethiopian official
hearing Coptic,
and a Syrian pilgrim
hearing Syriac,
and a Mesopotamian trader
hearing Akkadian.
Unexpectedly, on the streets of Jerusalem,
each hearing their own language,
and in their own language
hearing the story of Jesus.

Of course others
don't bother to stop.
They hear the snippets of different languages
and dismiss them as the unintelligible babbling
of people who drank so much last night
that they couldn't make it back down the ladder from the roof
inside,
and still have far too much alcohol
in their blood.

And they laugh,
and point their fingers,
and then continue on their way.

But then Peter
leans over the parapet
and begins to speak.

And what's astounding about this sermon,
apart from the fact that it's Peter who is speaking,
Peter, who was so afraid the night that Jesus died
that he denied even knowing him,
Peter has somehow found courage,
and not just courage
but a profound understanding.
Because as he listens to the disciples around him
speaking in other languages,
somehow
he makes a connection
with that night
before Jesus died,
when Jesus sat with his friends at dinner
and promised to send them his Spirit,
a Spirit that would lead them in truth, would teach them
and would be with them.
And he connects that spirit
with the Spirit
that is promised by God
through the prophet Joel,
a Spirit
that would give to God's people
the gift of prophecy
that is
the gift of speaking
God's word
in God's name.

And that what is happens here on Pentecost,
the Spirit given to Peter
and to the disciples

as well,
so that they speak the good news of Jesus Christ
and people hear
and believe.

And it works. It works.
Because at the end of the chapter,
which we didn't read today,
it says that about three thousand people
heard,
and believed that day,
and they were baptized.
And they joined that band of followers of Jesus,
Praying,
and worshipping,
and telling the good news of Jesus.

That's the gift
of the Spirit.

If you read the New Testament,
all of us
are given gifts by the Spirit
for the common good.
Some are given wisdom
and some healing,
some serving and some teaching,
some leadership and some giving,
some administration and some mercy.
But there is one gift
that is given to all of us,
one gift given
so that we can fulfill the command of Christ.
And that gift
is speaking
about Jesus.

All of us
are called on
to share the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

And all of us
are given the gifts we need to do that.
Not to stand up and preach
but simply to share our faith
with others.

Today
little Parker
will be baptized.
And among the promises that will be made on his behalf,
the promises that he will take on himself when he grows up and is confirmed.
is the baptismal covenant.
And we will join him, as we reaffirm our baptismal faith.
And in that covenant are the words,
“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
We will answer,
“I will, with God’s help.”

We will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

Yesterday,
Lucas and Derek,
two of our young adults were confirmed.

8am
During their confirmation preparation,
one of the things I did with them
was to ask them to talk for a minute about Jesus.
I’m going to ask you to do that now.

9.30am
They are now going to tell you about their faith,
as they talk about what confirmation means to them.