

Today is Pentecost Sunday. The event that took place on this day as recorded in the book of Acts is celebrated as the birth of the Christian church. Pentecost is another name for the Jewish Feast of Weeks, observed 50 days after Passover. It was a spring harvest festival, a time of thanksgiving to God for the earth's bounty, hence our Call to Worship from Psalm 104.

At festival times, Hebrew people from all over the Mediterranean world made their way to Jerusalem to fulfill their religious obligations. For the disciples, this Pentecost would have been the first time that they had been together for a major feast since the Passover, that is, just before Jesus' death.

At his ascension, reinforcing words spoken at the Last Supper, Christ promised his followers that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit, and that they would be clothed with power from on high. He told them to go back to Jerusalem and wait there. According to Luke, there were about 120 believers in Jerusalem at that time.

On the festival day, as the disciples prayed together in the Upper Room, the Spirit came upon them, accompanied by a dramatic sound, "like the rush of a violent wind." Then "tongues, as of fire," flickered around them until one flame hovered over the

head of each disciple.

The Holy Spirit, signified by tongues of flame, came upon the disciples, and they began to speak fluently in languages previously unknown to them. Amazingly, they understood each other perfectly, as they spoke these unfamiliar languages.

Some who had gathered in Jerusalem heard the disciples speaking in their own languages, and wondered aloud at this strange phenomenon. Peter spoke on behalf of the other disciples, and answered the crowd by explaining that the miracle of the languages was the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Holy Spirit, as spoken through the prophet Joel. Peter was sure that this event of wind and flame meant that the new day of God's reign had begun.

The reference to the disciples speaking in various languages is an allusion to a reconciled humanity. What is envisioned here is a world community, one that stretches from the ends of the earth, with all its national, creedal, racial, geographical and tribal polarities, embraced by the love of Christ, and forged by the Spirit into a single, mutually-encouraging and focused community. Here proclaimed are the universal possibilities for a torn and fragmented world that is finally healed by servant love.

Pentecost is the reversal of the story of the tower of Babel. There, humankind tried to build a tower to heaven. At Pentecost, heaven comes down to humankind. The judgement of Babel, the confusion of tongues, and the scattering of people is replaced by blessing: a variety of tongues but unity in the Spirit. Pentecost does not end our human differences. Rather there is recognition of our oneness in God, our Creator and Redeemer.

This vision of a new worldwide community draws us into the realm of Biblical promise. The roots of our identity as Christians, the cornerstone of our existence, rest on the hope that the reign of God has begun and will be fulfilled.

The apostle Peter understood this awe-inspiring event as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy. As Christians you and I too cherish the living legacy of the Hebrew prophets, because they envision a new future amid fierce and frequently despairing and unjust circumstances.

We remember Isaiah's promise of a peaceable kingdom where the lion would lie down with the lamb, the infant would play over the viper's nest, where swords would be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, where we would neither learn nor engage in war anymore. This hope is so striking because Isaiah's

promise of peace came while all the evidence was to the contrary. Isaiah and his people were surrounded by empires, warlords, and tyrants, hungering to invade their nation, slaughter the citizens, and bind them to slavery. In the face of such catastrophes, Isaiah sees history turned upside down, a reversal of violence and inhumanity, a peaceable community created through and beyond anticipated defeat and ruin.

The prophet Joel, quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost, spoke words of promise and hope to a farming culture devastated by drought - crops shrunk and burned, but even worse, a land plagued by locusts, devouring, mutilating, ravaging everything in their fierce and frenzied invasion. In the midst of this, Joel spoke of a future of hope. Hope against hope...

Peter uses Joel's words to remind his listeners of a startling new future, where the dissonance of the human race will become the unity of the human family.

It is the Holy Spirit, God alive and active today that guides us in our work for peace, justice and harmony. It is the Holy Spirit which keeps us from thinking that our own individual stories are disconnected from the total story of world events.

And you and I will keep alive the prompting and the power of

the Spirit, by opening ourselves to the Spirit's filling, by committing ourselves to, working for, and exemplifying among ourselves, and to the world's skeptical bystanders, God's new future for creation.

The Biblical language of radical hope reminds us that the future, while in God's hands, will be built brick by brick, step by painful step by God's Spirit-filled people. It is a future built by perseverance, by tenacity and faithfulness.

Let us not grow discouraged about making a difference in our world. Pentecost reminds us that we are in existence as Church, not simply to survive in a risky time, but to stand and speak for a new future. This is our certainty: God's Spirit empowers women and men to proclaim a message powerful enough to transform lives, to change the course of human history, to enable us to work toward understanding and harmony among people from all nations and cultural backgrounds. And we can take encouragement in the knowledge that the example of the first disciples at Pentecost tells us that a small community of believers through the guidance of the Holy Spirit can turn the world upside down.

Friends, as we seek to play our part in God's redemptive mission, let us engage the world with confidence that the Spirit of God is upon us. Let us engage the world with enthusiasm, speaking

and acting joyfully, so that others will recognize the reality of hope that is available in Christ. And may God's Spirit pour out on each of us, young and old, male and female, that we may see visions, dream dreams, and live re-created lives as God's servant people. Thanks be to God. Amen