

The Rev. Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
The Feast of Pentecost ~ May 19, 2024  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
Acts 2:1-11  
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

*Come, Holy Spirit, and give life to my words, Amen.*

“Today we feel the wind beneath our wings  
Today the hidden fountain flows and plays  
Today the church draws breath at last and sings  
As every flame becomes a Tongue of praise.”<sup>1</sup>

So begins a sonnet by the great English poet and songwriter Malcolm Guite, entitled “Pentecost.”

Pentecost: The day when the disciples received the Gift of the Holy Spirit – not as a gentle rustling of the branches of an olive tree, but as a violent rush of wind – a current strong enough to animate the waters of Creation and give birth to the Church.

Pentecost: The Jewish festival, fifty days after Passover, remembering the giving of the Law, of Torah, to Moses on Mt. Sinai. On this day the disciples assemble in one place – in a *house*, the story goes – while the streets of Jerusalem teem with “devout Jews from every nation.” Listen for the buzz and thrum of the city, thronging with pilgrims. “Our people...enter in peace!” the leaders shout. Hear the bellow of oxen as they plod ahead of the parade of faithful to the Temple. Feel the press of humanity making their way up another Mount, Zion, bearing baskets that groan with first fruits. Smell the abundance of the spring harvest – wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranate, olives, dates. See the joyful scene unfolding just *outside* the walls of the house.<sup>2</sup>

The disciples, meanwhile, are *inside*. Why? Are they still together after choosing Matthias to replace Judas and round out the Team of Twelve, as we heard last week? Are they hunkered down out of fear, knowing that Jerusalem isn't safe for friends of Jesus just now? Are they *waiting*, with expectation, just as He said: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them...?”

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy sonnets for Christian year* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ifcj.org/learn/jewish-holidays/what-is-shavuot-the-jewish-pentecost>

No matter: “Suddenly from heaven [comes] a sound like the rush of a violent wind,” filling the house. Something happens to this group – an ecstatic, mystical, transcendent experience of God. They feel the heat of fire, of flames distributed among them, licking at them, energizing them, inspiring them, causing them to speak in “tongues,” in other languages.

It makes me wonder: What in the *world* had they been up to in that house up until now?

Such is the chaos, such is the cacophony, within those walls that people on the street start to notice. Their attention turns from the celebration of the harvest, from music and feasting and shouts of joy, to whatever it is that is going on inside. The text here isn’t clear: Do the crowds gather around the building, peering in the windows to watch the spectacle? Or does the party move out to the streets of Jerusalem – which seems more likely, given the noise and, frankly, the fire.

No matter: The point here is that, somehow, the distinction between this band of Galileans inside the house and the Jewish Diaspora, gathered from the corners of the known world outside the house, seems to melt away. The disciples are rural, northern people, often mocked by more urban sophisticates for their accent – and now, suddenly, they are understood.<sup>3</sup> Clearly. What they say makes sense. There is no doubt an element of bias, of classism, at play here, as the crowds marvel at how they are able to comprehend what these simple, country folk from the sticks are saying. *Can* anything good come out of Nazareth? It’s shocking!

Now I just have say that, for a people shaped and given their identity by Torah, the significance of this moment is probably pretty obvious to the gathered crowd. They know the passage from Genesis about the Tower of Babel; I imagine you remember it, too. The story goes that, once upon a time, everyone on earth spoke same language – until they decided to build a tower meant to reach as high as the heavens. The people were arrogant, and proud, and they wanted to be like God. So God stepped in, confused their language, and dispersed them. The myth offers a simplistic explanation for the variety of human languages and cultures – but, like the story of Icarus in Greek mythology, it also exposes a profound truth about human nature and our capacity to be self-serving and overly ambitious.

In this Acts account of Pentecost, divisions and *mis*-understandings are reversed – at least temporarily. The implication is that the peoples of the earth are empowered to become

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew W. Mitchell, “Matthew 26:73 and the Case of the Disappearing Galilean Accent,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 139, Issue 1, Society of Biblical Literature 2020.

“**a people**, forgiven, healed, renewed.” A small group of cowed, abandoned, fearful Galilean *disciples* – followers of Jesus – becomes *apostles* – called to “proclaim God’s love to the world and continue in the risen life of Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

We are, too – which is why we will pray these exact words after Communion this morning.

*Today we feel the wind beneath our wings  
Today the hidden fountain flows and plays  
Today the church draws breath at last and sings  
As every flame becomes a Tongue of praise.*

Today we celebrate the “Birthday of the Church,” the moment when the disciples-turned-apostles of Jesus first drew breath as the Body of Christ in the world. The moment when the Holy Spirit showed up and things changed. The moment when the Spirit created something out of nothing – a people out of many peoples. And we celebrate that the unpredictable, uncontrollable, all-powerful Spirit that empowered that band of Galileans long ago now gives *us* the ability to go and do and be all that God has created us to be... If only we will not stand in the way. If only our fear and limited vision do not keep us locked behind the walls of our failed imaginations.

This is *our* birthday, collectively, as a parish, as a community of faith here in Bethesda. It is fitting that today, May 19, is also the Feast Day of our Patron Saint, Dunstan – who, unfortunately, gets a bit overshadowed by all the hoopla of rushing wind and tongues of fire. And as many like to do on their birthdays, it seems meet and right to pause for a moment of self-reflection, a “How are we doing?” inventory, as former New York City Mayor Ed Koch used to say.

So, to that end, I invite you to turn to the inside cover of your worship bulletin to our Parish Vision Statement, discerned by our *Tending Our Soil* leadership and Vestry through a lot of prayer and conversation. Will you please in me in reading together:

*Guided by Jesus' love, we strive to create a community where all are welcomed, cherished, nourished,  
and inspired to act on that love and be stewards of all that God has entrusted to our care.*

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<sup>4</sup> *Enriching Our Worship 1*, © 1998, Church Publishing, Incorporated

Notice that these are “We” statements, not “I” statements, the ministry we have been called to do collectively. *Where two or three are gathered together...*

So: How ARE we doing?

- + How are we doing at welcoming, cherishing, and nurturing those who walk through these doors (or who peer in from the outside)?
- + How are we doing at moving out into the world, into the buzz and thrum of the community around us, on fire with the love of Jesus?
- + How are we doing at inspiring others to act on that love? How are we doing at inspiring others to be stewards of the bounty entrusted to our care?

Are we shy? Frightened? Concerned that we won't be understood by the world “out there”?

We are in a transitional moment here at St. Dunstan's: As Karen Edwards shared during announcements last week, we have just wrapped up our three-year journey with *Tending Our Soil*, the diocesan Thriving Congregations initiative in which we have been blessed to participate. We have accomplished a *lot* during this time, and we have much of which to be proud. Arguably there is more life and energy and Spirit in this place today than there was even two years ago. We've gained some traction, which is worth celebrating!

That said, we have to guard against taking our foot off the gas now that we won't have the accountability and structure of the *Tending Our Soil* program. We might be tempted to ease off a bit and retreat behind the safe walls of these buildings, rather than continuing to move out into the community.

But that's not what the Spirit is calling us to do. I'm very clear about that. Instead, we are meant to take what we have learned and seen and come to understand and use it to share God's love with a world so desperately in need. That's what it is to be the Church, the Body of Christ.

I began with the poet Malcolm Guite, and I'll end with the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi poet Rumi, with whom many of you, I'm sure, are familiar. Rumi wrote, “The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Coleman Banks, trans. *The Essential Rumi* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 2004), p. 36.

On this Pentecost, when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, we must not go back to sleep. Rather, may we be apostles, empowered and inspired and enlivened to continue Christ's mission here on earth.

Happy Birthday, my friends!

*Amen.*