**Birthday Memories**

Acts 2:1-21

May 23, 2021

Remember who you are. Has anyone ever heard that before? Maybe we heard it as a teenager getting ready to go off to college, or the military, or we were just moving away. And someone, maybe a parent, maybe it was a close family member gave us a talk about being true to ourselves… remembering the values we have been taught… living out of the story in which we were raised. Maybe we were even told that if things got bad to remember we have a home and family where we are always welcome and are loved. In a way, every Sunday in worship we do that…Here… Remember who we are. Any time we gather as God’s people we recall the story of God's people, as those who seek to live justly and compassionately proclaiming the reign of God. A few times during the year we remember some significant moments of the story. We celebrate and remember Jesus’ birth at Christmas by singing and dramatically portraying his birth. During Advent we recall the part of the story where there is anticipation for a messiah. In the spring, during Lent, we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, then we remember his death and resurrection during Holy Week and Easter. Today we remember another significant part of our story. It's like a birthday memory...one that we want to remember…like child or grandchild’s first birthday when they got to eat cake and had it all over their face…like a recent milestone birthday – 16, 21, 40, 65, 80 or even 90! Today we remember a special part of our Christian story – about how the church came to be …it’s like a birthday memory.

According to the gospel of Luke there were a lot of people at this party – maybe up to 120 at first. The book of Acts is a continuation of Luke’s telling of the gospel story by the way. And according to Luke, these followers were waiting in Jerusalem as Jesus had asked them to do. While waiting there, they were praying together, anticipating the promised gift of God’s Spirit. When the gift finally arrived the day and time just happened to be Pentecost. Pentecost, also called the Feast of Weeks was a harvest celebration held 50 days after Passover. By this time, it was becoming a celebration of Israel’s sacred history, namely the giving of the law on Sinai. So there were not only the group of disciples gathered, but the city was filled with Jews from every nation. And Luke says when the disciples were all together, all of a sudden there was a sound, like a loud wind, a tongue-like flame rested on each of them, they were filled with God’s Spirit and began speaking in all the different languages of the people that had come to the city. It was such a ruckus that it spread beyond the gathering and people from the city started to come around. Some heard their language spoken and it was about God’s great deeds and others thought these Jesus followers were drunk. As we can imagine, things began to escalate ...we know how loud parties can be. In the midst of the commotion, someone might have whistled or something to get everyone’s attention, and Peter stood up to clear the air. “This is what has been promised,” he said. And he quoted the prophet Joel’s words that God had promised to pour out the Spirit on everyone – sons, daughters, women and men young and old, slave and free. You see first century Jews believed that although God’s spirit had been active in the past, the Spirit was no longer present. The hope of God’s people was the returning of the Spirit and God’s renewal of all things! When that day came there would be visions and dreams, it would be a new age and God would bring them to a new place. And Peter said, “yes, that’s what this is!”

So this day has been a significant birthday story for the church. Bigger than life. Memorable. Strange! How else could the explosive growth of this Jesus movement be explained? Yes, it does seem a little out there. Fire showing up on people and no one being burned - the ability to speak other languages without any knowledge or practice. Should we read this metaphorically? Should we take it with a grain of salt? In that ancient culture this kind of story would not be a stretch for anyone. Over the centuries Christians have interpreted it several ways. Some of us may really want to explore those and I encourage you to do so, but my guess is that when we come to worship what most of us want to know is, is God really real, and can I really be in touch with God’s presence in a way that helps me understand and live a meaningful and faithful life? Our story says YES God is really real, and YES we can be in communion with God and be empowered by God because that very presence, the Spirit of God has been given to us. One way to understand this is to reflect on this as the “divine indwelling.” The phrase divine indwelling captures the truth claimed in this story that God’s presence is not something we have within that we now have control over – rather its God’s life within us, God’s work, God’s power, God’s self as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. And it’s a powerful truth. Will Willamon, author and professor at Duke Divinity School said it well when he noted that this image of wind in the story tells us that the work of God here is a coming loose, a breaking open. It’s like the wind of God at creation, giving life, breathing life into the cosmos!

I’m not suggesting today that there is only one way that God’s spirit is present. For some, God seems to be present in silence and prayer. For others, its in reading and reflecting on the scriptures and the God behind them, or in meditation on the presence of God in nature, that we sense God speaking to our deepest self and deepest longings. For others it’s in active service to our neighbor that we are aware of that presence of God. In the food we prepare and share with the hungry, or the cup of cold water we give to the stranger, somehow we know we have been in the presence of Jesus. For still others it is in worship, in song, or in the hearing of scripture, or in public prayer that we make that connection with the divine indwelling. Somehow too in the breaking of bread at the Lord’s Table, Jesus is made known to us. But if this story tells us anything, it tells us that what God’s spirit is going to do is anybody’s guess! It’s like the wind. Sometimes it is a quiet breeze and sometimes it is a blast that blows the doors open!

Its Pentecost Sunday. Today we remember the birth of the church and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Today we proclaim that the presence of God is gift and is real and the invitation for us is to be present - to God. In this book “Holy Longing,” Ronald Rolheiser said, “God is always present, but we are not always present to God…God is no more present in a church than in a bar, but generally we are more present to God in a church than in a bar." For some of us, our understanding of the gift of God’s spirit is mostly a doctrine or belief…we may be a little cautious about the strangeness of this Pentecost story or may have been put off by fringe interpretations of this gift of God’s spirit. Maybe for us the Spirit of God is more of a statement we affirm, or a theological truth we attest to and as one biblical scholar has noted, we must remember that this story was not told so that we could “theologize about the spirit.” This story was told to communicate that “God’s people are a people who let the wind sweep though our lives, hearts, minds and imaginations transforming us into people whose hearts are on fire for God!” The story affirms too that some tangible things happen when God’s spirit is at work. This story lets us know that the divine indwelling is not only about the inner life. The gift of God’s Spirit is not only about the goodness of God’s presence within, but as one writer has said, “it’s like the wind that launches a fleet of ships!” When we are present to God who is always present to us, we get moved by the wind! When we are in communication and communion with God, we may have decisions to make because God is going to help us see who we really are as God’s children and that may mean there will be things God wants us to do. Here in the Pentecost story the first movement of the Spirit was intelligible speech about the great deeds of God to a very diverse audience! That makes sense. When we have sensed God at work in our lives it affects our story and how we tell it. Anyone have a good memory about a worship service that moved you– an anthem or a special song that lifted you into the heavens?; maybe it was a mission experience – you took some food to a member, or helped with tornado or hurricane relief?; maybe it was a mission trip to central America, or local mission and in your encounter with people in need you knew you were living Jesus’ way?; maybe it was in a small group, or a Sunday School class?; maybe it was the miracle of the birth of a child, or the overcoming of an illness. And the experience and memory has become part of who we are. When God's spirit is at work, that wind, that breath of the divine moves us! For a few months now you have been telling your story in small groups, reflecting on who you are, noticing what is working and not working, and focusing on where God may be calling you as you listen to one another. When we are present to God, then we need to be ready to move. We need to be ready for the power of God to fill and send us. We need to be ready for the wind of God to fill our sails and take us wherever God wants us to go. We need to be ready to be the church that Pentecost powerfully launched into the world – a church launched by the wind of God into mission – a church guided by the compassion of Christ and a gospel of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. That’s the Pentecost story. That’s the one we claim for our beginnings. That’s where we came from. Today we remember who we are!