

***BEFORE THERE WAS WIND AND FIRE***

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University Congregational Church

Pentecost Sunday – June 12, 2011

**Acts 2: 1- 4 (NEB)**

**While the day of Pentecost was running its course they were all together in one place, when suddenly there came from the sky a noise like that of a strong driving wind, which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like flames of fire, dispersed among them and resting on each one. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance.**

These verses from the Acts of the Apostles are read today in Christian churches around the globe. This is Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost means “fifty days” which is celebrated about seven weeks after Passover. Many Christians call this the birthday of the church. The basic idea is that the church was blessed with the power of God to fulfill its gospel mission. Unfortunately, people get preoccupied with the spectacular elements of this story – wind, fire, and speaking in tongues.

It reminds me of the old story about the preacher who was prone to theatrics. He was preparing his sermon and called the sexton into his office. He pointed to a cage in the corner of his study that held a pure white dove. He told the janitor, “On Sunday morning I want you to sit up in the balcony. When you hear me say, ‘And the Holy Spirit descended like a dove,’ I want you to release the dove so it can fly over the congregation.”

Sunday morning arrived and the sexton was sitting dutifully in the balcony. The preacher launched into his sermon and came to the phrase, “And the Holy Spirit descended like a dove.” He paused. Nothing happened. He repeated the phrase with a little more volume, “The Holy Spirit descended like a dove.” Still, no action.

Finally he thundered, “I said the Holy Spirit descended like a dove.” From the balcony a voice called out, “The cat ate the Holy Spirit. Do you want me to throw the cat down?”

The deeper meaning of Pentecost and its Jewish origins are lost to most Christians. Pentecost, also known as the “feast of weeks,” is found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Pentecost is a wheat harvest festival, appropriate for us in Kansas as the wheat harvest is now beginning. Faithful Jews brought two loaves of wheat bread as an offering. The next reading that I would like to offer you is from the Apocrypha, the book of Tobit 2: 1-7.

The Apocrypha is sometimes called “Intertestamental Literature.” It roughly records a span of about 400 years, from the time of Malachi to John the Baptist. The original language is Hebrew but it is not considered a part of the Hebrew canon. The significant events of this period include the conquest of Israel by Alexander the Great, the Syrian rule of Antiochus Epiphanies and his defilement of the Temple, and Roman imperial dominion. Perhaps the most intriguing books include the Maccabean rebellion against Roman occupation. The viability and integrity of Israel is the prevailing issue of the Apocrypha.

If you grew up in a Protestant household like mine you had the King James Version of the Bible or the Revised Standard Version. The Apocrypha was not included in these versions at that time. It is found in the Catholic and Orthodox canon.

The book of Tobit tells the story of a righteous man by that same name who lived in Ninevah after the northern tribes of Israel had been deported to Assyria. Tobit’s name means “my good.” In the Hebrew his name would be Tobias, which

means “Yahweh is good.” Tobias is Tobit’s son. Tobit, like Job, is ridiculed for his charity and faithfulness to the law. This is one of Tobit’s stories:

**During the reign of Esarhaddon, I returned to my house, and my wife Anna and my son Tobias were restored to me. At our festival of Pentecost, that is the Feast of the Weeks, a good dinner was prepared for me and I sat down to eat. The table was laid and a lavish meal was put before me. I said to my son Tobias: “Go, my boy, and if you can find any poor man of our captive people in Ninevah who is whole-heartedly mindful of God, bring him and he shall share my dinner. I will wait for you until you return.” Tobias went to look for a poor man of our people, but he came back and said, “Father!”**

**“Yes my son?” I replied.**

**He answered, “Father, one of our nation has been murdered and his body is lying in the market-place. He was strangled only a moment ago.”**

**I jumped up and left my dinner untasted. I took the body from the square and put it in one of the outbuildings until sunset when I could bury it; then I went home, duly bathed myself, and ate my food in sorrow. I recalled the saying of the prophet Amos in the passage about Bethel:**

**“Your feasts shall be turned into mourning,  
and all your songs into lamentation,”**

**and I wept. After sunset I went and dug a grave and buried the body.**

Allow me to walk through this story because there are subtleties in the narrative that give punch to its meaning. Tobit is celebrating Pentecost, and as a harvest festival I am guessing there is much to be thankful for. He enters the house where he is joined by his wife and son. The table board is generously spread. In fact, there is so much food that he instructs his son to go out into the street and find a poor God fearing Jewish captive in Ninevah. Specifically, Tobit says, “wholeheartedly mindful of God.” The story says that Tobias went in search of “a poor man of our people.” He returns only a short time later to report that he has found “one of our nation,” who has been murdered and his body is lying in the street. Tobit leaves the table and goes out into the streets to recover “the body,” stores it in an out building and later buries “the body.”

Notice that the qualifying characteristics that would allow a person to dine with Tobit became increasingly unimportant. “A poor man of our nation who is wholeheartedly mindful of God” becomes “the body.” Tobias reports having found one of our nation. Eligibility of Tobit’s hospitality becomes less concerned about a God fearing Jew and is reoriented toward human being. The body is that of a man who has been murdered and treated with gross disrespect. His Jewish religious and national identity lose their importance.

Here are some other things to think about. Note that the man is strangled to death. In the ancient Jewish mind this is the worst possible death. We are given life because God breathed life into our being. Asphyxiation not only kills the body but also removes us from the life-giving presence of God. Jews are prohibited for eating an animal that is strangled to death. The death of Jesus was essentially a death by asphyxiation, adding a layer of shame to his crucifixion. In Tobit’s story another cloud of shame is draped over the body because it has not been buried, an indignity that no Jew should suffer.

After Tobit stores the body he takes a bath, a requirement under Jewish law for any one who has had contact with a corpse. He eats his dinner in sorrow and remembers the lamentation of the prophet Amos. He would also take another bath after he dug the grave and buried the man.

Before the Christian church rushes off to wind, fire, and holy tongues, I think we need to recover the context of Pentecost. To be honest, Tobit’s celebration of Pentecost makes more sense to me than the metaphors used in the book of Acts. Or, I can better make sense of those metaphors in the light of Tobit’s story.

The Jews associate the festival of the wheat harvest with the giving and receiving of Torah. Tobit was a man who had dedicated his life to keeping the Law of God. He was a righteous man. Tobit was a decent man, conscious of the life that was a sacred gift from a sacred source. He was a humble and thankful man, conscious of the abundance of providence and at the same time aware that there were poor human beings all around him. All he had to do was to send his kid out of the house and pick one up off the street to feed a hungry mouth.

Tobit offers a model of religious fidelity that can never replace the fireworks of wind, flames, and tongues. Pentecost is a season of thanksgiving. Even in the midst of deportation and exploitation Tobit finds much to celebrate. The fifteenth century mystic, Thomas a Kempis wrote:

Be thankful for the smallest blessing, and you will deserve to receive greater. Value the least gifts no less than the greatest, and simple graces as especial favours. If you remember the dignity of the Giver, no gift will seem small or mean, for nothing can be valueless that is given by the most high God.

I am reminded of a family who were customers of my father's dry cleaning business. The man had a low level sales job. The mother was a work at home mom but her main task was caring for one of her children who had cystic fibrosis. Like many CF children she struggled with breathing and her mom routinely pounded on her back and chest to break up the thick mucosa that lined her lungs. There were also digestive tract problems that typically accompany the disease. Because of the father's low paying job and high medical expenses the family was virtually poor.

The suits and shirts that he brought to our dry cleaner were often worn and threadbare. The cuffs were frayed on shirts and trousers. Buttons were often missing or the zipper to his pants would not function properly. He never asked her for these

alterations. My mother repaired them all the same and never charged the man. I doubt he even knew that was a fee for such services.

I was at a mall one day and saw the family walking toward me. The mother was wearing a very faded moo-moo and flip-flops. Dad wore a pair of Bermuda shorts and a tee shirt that was at least two sizes too small. His gut hung over his waistband. The daughter was dressed in mismatched shorts and top. They were all eating ice cream. They walked in lock-step talking and laughing loudly.

The shop girls in their chic outfits, manicured fingernails, and flawless hair stared at this family. They rolled their eyes as the carefree trio passed by.

At that moment you would never guess how hard their lives were or that they had a care in the world. They strolled through the mall with a profound appreciation for the life they had with each other; and the joy of ice-cream, waltzing through the air conditioned mall on a hot Florida afternoon. They knew what Thomas a Kempis meant, "If you remember the dignity of the Giver, no gift will seem small or mean, for nothing can be valueless that is given by the most high God."

Pentecost offers thanks for the simple pleasure of wheat and bread. Is there anything more basic to humanity than bread? It is a theme in every culture that I know of, regardless of whether or not you are talking about pita, taco, Indian flatbread, corn bread, baguettes, rolls, biscuits, and all of the breads made of wheat, rye, barley, potatoes, rice, and *ad infinitum*. When Jesus prayed, "Give us this day our daily bread," this is the stuff he was talking about. In his culture bread was the main staple for a hungry family. Day laborers often earned only enough to make bread to feed their families. "Daily bread" is not a spiritual metaphor in the mind of Jesus. Daily

bread is what sustains human beings. Pentecost celebrates the necessity and gift of bread.

Tobit went to his home to give thanks for bread. With gratitude in his heart he was also conscious of the hungry. He could not possibly eat everything on the table and he wanted to share the bounty of God's grace. He asked his son to find a hungry person. His plan was to feed that person. We know from the story that Tobit buried the poor fellow instead. The point is that he did the right thing by his neighbor.

Now I do not want this to turn into a guilt sermon. This is not a guilt story. It is the story of a wonderfully generous person who acted out of the gratitude deep within his heart. I know how generous you are and I know that many – if not most – of you support charities in Wichita and around the world. I am not for one second suggesting that you should do more. We are just celebrating Pentecost.

Nor am I suggesting that we must create some corporate sized institution to fight hunger. Tobit simply offered his charity to the need on hand. He did not create an institute or a foundation. There are plenty of wonderful organizations locally, nationally, and globally that fight hunger. Right here in Wichita we have the Kansas Food Bank and the Lord's Diner. Nationally there is Bread for the World and internationally there is Oxfam. Tobit's plan is simple. When you meet a hungry person feed him or her. When you find a dead body, bury it. Pentecost is simple dignity for basic human needs.

I do not think it is a coincidence that this story in Luke-Acts occurs on the Jewish holiday of Pentecost. And I wonder as the early Christians gathered in that room if all this business about wind, fire, and tongues was not to change the focus of

Pentecost, but to empower it, to embolden it, and challenge the Followers of the Way to reach new heights of God's love. The gift of tongues was not given for incomprehensible gibberish or psychobabble. It certainly was not given to make conflict in the church or to create a denomination. If anything, it was given for the shared language of compassion, justice, mercy, forgiveness, and hope. Regardless of anyone's native tongue that is the language that every human ear yearns to hear. However faint, the decibels of grace will penetrate the hungriest soul.

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