

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

PENTECOST -- GOD'S PRESENCE

Acts 2: 1 – 21 May 31, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

All in one place.

Filled with the same Spirit.

Enlivened by the same wind.

Warmed by tongues of fire.

Pentecost.

That is what happens when we come together to worship. The Spirit blows upon us through the songs we sing, the prayers we offer, the breaths we take. This Spirit of God may comfort us. It may scare us. This Spirit of God may confuse or clarify us. But the Spirit never forces us – we are always free to choose whether or how we will respond to the Spirit of God.

One of my favorite photographs is one not taken here on earth. It was taken from a space capsule. It shows the earth rising in the background. The foreground is the parched surface of the moon. The title of the photograph is "Earth Rise."

The disciples are gathered together – they are fearful – and they are wondering how they are going to make it without Jesus. They are afraid. Then – Pentecost. There is this rush of a great wind. It blows a new spirit upon them – in them. There are people among them who have come from all over the region to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Pentecost. This wind draws them all together – all on that blue planet – and they understand the Spirit of God among them. They are surprised to hear someone speaking their own language – these Parthians, Libyans, Galileans. It is this Spirit of God that gathers them together – in one place. And before the day is over, the church grows from 120 scared, lonely, frightened people – those who had lost their direction – to more than 3000!! It is called the birthday of the church.

The book of Acts – the Acts of the Apostles – is a story of their actions of faith. The first four books in the New Testament teach us about what God does in Jesus. But this book of Acts should probably be titled "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit." This book bears witness to the change brought to God's people through this mighty Spirit at Pentecost.

The church – indeed throughout our history – we the People of God have struggled to define this God we know in our lives. The church did come up with this formula – but don't push it too far. It is called the Trinity. With it, the church tries to define God.

God ---- Father --- Creator

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God --- Son --- Redeemer

God --- Spirit --- Sustainer

I suppose that formula helps more than it confuses – but this 3 in 1 is hard math to follow. Don't even try to add it up. Jesus even had trouble with this concept of Spirit. "The Spirit blows where it chooses – you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes." Right!

I have read several good books on the Holy Spirit. I can't say any of them make me satisfied about the concept. I doubt we will understand the Spirit from a book – and that doesn't mean I think the books are bad. I believe that we have to experience the Spirit, like those first disciples on the day of Pentecost.

The Spirit blows through our own life – it rearranges things – it causes us to reach for our hopes and dreams. And it causes us to include others. I don't know that you can make this happen. We pray for the Spirit to come in our lives. This morning the choir sang "O Spirit of God" asking God to blow in our lives to bring justice, beauty and joy. We probably should not sing that or pray that if we don't want anything to change in our lives.

Praying for the Holy Spirit to come is one thing. I believe the difficult part may be recognizing the Spirit when it comes in our lives. We don't talk about the spirit coming much into our lives – we don't use those exact words – but it is evident to me that when people talk about their lives – they have experienced this Spirit of God.

Sometimes our definition of Spirit is spoken of in words like "A new beginning." We might not use the word Spirit, but we do experience this new way of doing, this new way of thinking, this new way of trying to live. It is a new beginning for us.

Sometimes the Spirit is evident as we give people a way back into a relationship. We may have struggled with how to forgive, how to reach out to someone estranged – then somehow we just do it. The Spirit helps us begin the relationship again.

Also, I don't believe the Spirit just acts in one person's life at a time. Remember the 60's? Some of us do. This Spirit would not let us rest until we broke down barriers created by race. The Civil Rights struggle had its leaders, but the Spirit worked in hundreds of people to bring about a more just and fair way of our living together.

Pentecost – God's spirit among us. Jeff and John attended our church. They were persons who were born with Down syndrome. They functioned well enough to hold jobs. Jeff's mother had taken Jeff and his friend John to sit in the balcony every Sunday for worship. I noticed John would pick up bulletins for his family, so I asked him if he and John would like to hand out bulletins in the balcony each Sunday. A little later, the head usher asked

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the could recruit Jeff and John to take up the offering in the balcony. A few months later, on a bright Sunday morning, Jeff and John were the two usher asked to bring the offering to the altar as we sang the Doxology. Pentecost! Can you see and feel that Spirit of God?

Susan came to church with her parents every Sunday. She was also born with Down syndrome. She sat on the aisle toward the back of the sanctuary so I could greet her every Sunday as I walked out in the recession. We always talked as she and her parents left worship. Her parents came to my office. They were saying “Susan wants to join the church. But she will never understand all those questions about resisting evil and believing in the Trinity.” I answered “I doubt if anyone responding to those questions understands them. But Susan does love Jesus and she loves this church. The next Sunday she came forward and joined the church. I asked her if she loved Jesus and the church and if she would like to join. She was added to our membership. Pentecost. Can you see and feel the Spirit of God?”

She knelt at Christmas Eve Communion – the first Christmas since her husband of fifty something years had died. It was one of those come, kneel, receive communion, pray and leave when you want to deals. I noticed she began to cry as she knelt there. At that moment – a friend of hers – for many years – who later told me she just happened to be at the service – walked up and knelt beside her and put her arm around her. Pentecost. Can you see and feel the Spirit of God?

Most of the work of the Spirit will never make the headlines – but it is the presence of God moving in and among us. May we recognize the Spirit among us this day.