“ . . . And Promises to Keep”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

If you were here in worship last week, you will recognize the text of the lesson from the Gospel of John. We smiled to sing together the confusing words of the Beatles’ song, “I Am the Walrus” with its “I am you and you are me and . . . we are all together. I want to make sure we have in mind this idea of relationship. Jesus is describing his relationship with God and with his disciples and explaining what it is that we are celebrating today. Yes, indeed, only the disciples and then Paul saw the risen Christ in body, and that is not something that some of us may yearn for, but we know won’t happen until the hereafter. Still, Jesus also says that the relationship of having God within us is possible through the Holy Spirit; that this mystery, this radical, fiery, windy moment endures. So, I want to continue with a song, which I hope you will pick up quickly and join in singing—eventually loudly!

“If you believe and I believe, and we together pray, the Holy Spirit must come down and set God’s people free, and set God’s people free, and set God’s people free; the Holy Spirit must come down and set God’s people free.” [Traditional Zimbabwe song arranged by John Bell of the Iona Community]

I would love very much to be able to share with you the experience of the sense of the Spirit’s presence I felt most profoundly, for the first time, worshipping at Taizé, the monastic community in eastern France near the border of Switzerland. We here are not thousands or even hundreds of worshippers that were there when I was in October of 1991, but the Spirit is no less present here! So, I would like you to try something with me, recognizing that God is with us, and I hope you will be more responsive than my high school students in NJ when I would ask them to participate in something. Folks at home will be able to hear us and I invite you to sing along there, as well!

*We sing the song together, quietly and go on for a while. We will sing it all together, then gradually loudly—just as loudly as we possibly can.*

Can you feel it? Do you feel your heart stirring just a little bit? – “Ten more minutes,” calls out a church member! That’s exactly right, though I wouldn’t want to disturb the “frozen chosen” of New England too much. There is something, though, about repetition that takes us out of our heads and into our hearts. There is something about the togetherness of singing that helps us know our togetherness—all together. I would wish for all of you to know the experience of thousands of voices, but I also would wish for all of you the knowledge of this truth: if you believe and I believe and we, together, pray, the Holy Spirit must come down and set God’s people free. That’s the gift we are celebrating today. *We sing again, very quietly and a second time to lift the roof.*

The Holy Spirit must come down and set God’s people free. On Thursday afternoon I shared an exercise with worshippers at Parker Ridge. As a high school student myself, I had the opportunity to study with several well published poets and authors of other kinds. Plucked from our regular classes once a week, ten of us from around the county would study at the feet of masters in the craft. While I have remembered well several of the lessons some of them shared, I carried one into my own teaching and found myself thinking of it this week. Jack Gilbert had us teenagers take all our swirling ideas—us teenagers with our swirling everything—and write. Then, we would take our sentences and reduce each of them to just four words. So, from our little exercise the other day, I would ask you what four words you would use to describe the scene that we hear about in the book of Acts. Anyone want to share a single word? *Fire. Lift. Fearlessly in love. Strength. Miraculous. Exhilarating.* If we were simply to proclaim those words, if I said to you in similar manner to before “*Fire, Fearless, Exhilaration, Live, Breath”—a word I want to throw in—*what would people know of us in this church? “Love.” That is a wonderful exercise, but it is also a good exercise for poetry and maybe not so much for the Spirit, because we have such a limited vocabulary in our language, don’t we? There is a wonderful part about this scene that has everyone with their very limited communication suddenly understanding one another. The miracle of Pentecost is that God gives each person the word they need to hear. Do you need uplift? You will hear it here? Do you need exhilaration? You will hear it here. Do you need love? You will hear it here. And we could go on. The wonderful thing about this that Peter has to explain to everyone is that it *is* miraculous, but it is also very grounded. It is an ancient prophecy of God’s promises now fulfilled. We have been hearing about it for a long time; we have been dreaming about it for a long time. There is something so stunning about the story in today’s lesson from Acts, and also from John’s Gospel; so stunning that it can be overwhelming with all of its details. The other kind of lesson from first Jack Gilbert and then Jana Harris was in a kind of condensing or distilling of important parts.

I want to read for you a passage from the book of Romans 8:14-17.

“All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness *with our spirit* that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

So, a question I have let roll around in my head this is why Pentecost is both the birth of the church and also a celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit? Well, of COURSE they are one and the same, because without one, the other is impossible. Pentecost can remind us of the birth and also the *birthing* of the church, present with us always; the Holy Spirit is possible in ongoing and renewing ways, making the Church a living body of the Spirit with us in that miraculous “In us, with us, with Christ, with God” way thanks to the Holy Spirit because the Spirit *is* with us, just as Jesus promised!

God has kept God’s promises. And how do we keep ours? Maybe we can think the following with Anne Howard of the Beatitudes Society: “That work of the Spirit was not just telling the story of Jesus; it was living a new kind of life. The followers of the Way, as the followers of Jesus called themselves, were known for a new kind of love, a kind of radical hospitality. They preached a new kind of equality, where women and men shared in the work, where slaves and free were equals, where there were no outsiders. They formed a community like that described by the prophet Joel, where both sons and daughters prophesied, where old and young shared dreams and visions. And they were known for the concrete way they shared their goods and re-distributed them to the poor. This was a new way of understanding their work and their play, their money and their politics. It was a way that threatened the status quo of Rome and of the temple, a way that shook the powers and the principalities to their foundations. This new way was not only about a new way of believing; it meant a new way of living.”

So, I want to go back to encapsulating things again . . . If you were to describe what you hope and pray for most, in a new way of living for the world, in a single word, what might that word be? *Hopeful, Peace, Love, Compassion*, . . . I move between peace and love-- first, love, is one that I can’t utter without knowing Jesus’ radical expounding on what that means—we love and we pray for *all*, including those we would deem enemies. The second, peace, is something we have not seen in its entire fulfillment; is something that passes all human understanding. But we seek it, and we have caught glimpses of it. We yearn for it, and especially these days, when violence erupts in our own neighborhoods and in countries at war. How will we meet violence with peace? How will we foster God’s peace within us such that we may tap into when we meet external violence?

Into what deep belief will the Spirit move us? Then, believing that, into what new and radical love will the Spirit move us to live? In what new peace might we live? In what new hope, in what new compassion might we live? God is with us; the church is being born; the world needs Christ and Christ is with us and in us, thanks be to God! Amen!