

Homily: May 20, 2018

Today we celebrate two beginnings. The Day of Pentecost often called the beginning of the church. And this day is also a traditional day for the Baptism into the Christian community.

We do this through the Wind of the Spirit and the Water of Baptism: elements which open the pathway into the Body of Christ. These are entry points into the Christian community and its transformative power.

Both elements reverberate throughout our Biblical tradition. They often work together in synergy.

The Hebrew word for "Spirit" (ruah) can also mean wind or breath.

The first two verses of Genesis set out a relationship between wind (as Spirit) and the waters: in the beginning, in the formless void, a wind of God swept over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1-2)

And it was into these waters that God created the first living things. (Gen1:20)

And it was into the dust of the ground, that God breathed life into man. (Gen. 2:7)

Breath of God, the Wind of the Spirit, brings life.

And in the story of the Great Flood, it was with water, in the form of a flood, that God sent to cleanse the corruption of man from the earth.

2.

And it was wind that God sent to make the flood subside. (Gen. 6,7,&8)

And, in the Exodus story, God sent a strong wind to open the sea for the escape to freedom of the people of Israel.

And then the waters of the sea closed in and destroyed the pursuing Egyptian hosts. (Gen. 14:21 & 14: 27-28)

It was in the waters of the river Jordan, that John the Baptist called people to repent and be washed. And it was into these water, Jesus was baptized and began his ministry. (Mk 1) and Jesus' disciples continued the practice of baptizing. (Jn. 4).

Over and over again, we see the cleansing power of water and the life-giving power of wind, the Spirit.

In today's service, we embrace all these aspects.

After Jesus' Resurrection, his first disciples were confused. For three years they followed their charismatic leader. They watched his healing miracles and heard his parables about the impending Kingdom of God.

After his brutal execution, they fled in fear.

And then he reappeared. And then he was gone once more. Where was the Kingdom he promised?

How could he be the Messiah, the new King David to restore Israel?

3.

Why could not Jesus simply return and stay and tell them what to believe and do? Why has he left again?

In our lectionary Gospel reading today, Jesus explains:

It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness (Jn 16:7-9)

It is the Spirit who reveals what goodness is and what falsehood is.

And the Spirit comes, when Jesus in the flesh leaves.

They Apostles and others re-gathered in Jerusalem and prayed constantly and examining scripture for meaning. Jesus had promised them the Spirit to assist them. Where was that power?

And then one day as they were gathered together, a transformative moment occurred. With the wind of the Spirit and tongues of fire, they began to speak and prophesy. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they spoke in many languages and many ways. (Acts 2:2-4)

And it became suddenly very clear to Peter that he said:

God has made this Jesus ... both Lord and Messiah.” (Acts 2:36)

The process of understanding and incorporating the Good News of Jesus Christ is a challenging struggle. The first disciples had seen Jesus in the flesh, witnessed his miracles, heard his teaching, examined Scripture and most importantly they prayed constantly. (Acts 1:14)

4.

Knowledge, thought and study are important steps to Christ. But ultimately, it is prayer and inspiration, which bring the final movement to prophetic comprehension.

We cannot simply think it out. The Apostle Paul wrote:

..... the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. (Rom 8:23-27)

So, today, we again renew our beginning and journey to Christ. We vicariously participate again in the water of baptism washing away the old to prepare for our new life. We recommit to the Baptismal Covenant which sets forth the mysteries of Christ, and delineates the behavior that comes with accepting that Covenant.

This constant process of being open to Christ and embodying Christ is ongoing, never finished.

One program in this parish which assists this process is the Education for Ministry program, EFM.

Each week, we gather in small groups and study Scripture, Church history and theology. Most importantly though, we pray and share deeply our feelings and understandings from what we learn and can discern. The EFM group becomes a praying and examining community, much like the disciples in the upper room.

Sometimes, the sharing is loud and boisterous. If you walk by on a Weds. morning, it may remind you of the day of Pentecost.

5.

Sometimes the EFM process is also painful and confusing, as we probe our own beloved concepts of the Christian Mystery and sometimes find them lacking.

A personal example: I was surprised to study the first chapters of the Book of Isaiah and find that the Prophet was not writing about the Messiah at all. Isaiah was instead addressing the King and was predicting the continuation of his royal line.

Those beautiful Isaiah quotes in Matthew's Gospel and later in Handel's Messiah were thus misappropriated and out of the original context. Taken aback, it made me question the entire proposition whether OT writers had predicted a Messiah such as Jesus. A disquieting feeling.

Struggling in this intellectual discomfort, sharing it with my EFM group, I eventually experienced (shall we say) an inspired, or in the Spirit, breakthrough. I realized it did not matter to me whether the OT predicted Jesus. I was presently experiencing the transforming grace of Jesus Christ and that was enough. These beautiful Isaiah words expressed that grace – whether Isaiah intended them to or not. I thus found resolution and deeper understanding.

So, I offer an invitation to you: explore the possibility of EFM for yourself. There are EFM participants here today. Feel free to approach one and learn the details of this powerful program. It offers a real opportunity to assist you in your journey of faith.

During these past seven weeks of Easter, we have re-enacted the journey of the first disciples. Each Sunday, we have heard Scripture readings of Jesus' teachings and the first activities of the disciples sharing the Good News. And we have pondered for ourselves the meaning of these words and events.

6.

And now today, we pray for the Spirit of God to again enliven our understanding and empower our love for God, one another and for all our neighbors.

In closing let us pray:

Dear Lord, our God, we ask for your help and assistance in our journey with Christ. Send us your Holy Spirit, so that we can understand more profoundly and love more deeply.

As Jesus taught us, we seek to love You, each other, our neighbors, our enemies, all humankind more fully.

We pray this in the name of Jesus.

Amen

