

May 19, 2024 Pentecost

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Acts 2:1-21, Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-7, 12-15

[Diana Butler Bass, The Cottage, 5-19-24 Sunday Musings "Uprising Unleashed-Against the Empire"

https://open.substack.com/pub/dianabutlerbass/p/uprising-unleashed-against-the-empire?r=1dkeho&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email.

Barbara Lundblad's Bible Study at the Minneapolis Area Synod Assembly May 2-4, 2024.]

Grace and peace, beloved of the Holy One.

Pentecost, the 50th day after Easter, the giving of the Holy Spirit.

While our bible readings for this day rotate each year,

one bible reading is always included and that is Acts 2, the story of the first Pentecost.

God bless the lector on Pentecost! Can I get an Amen?

All those nationalities! All those pronunciations! John Pignatello, you did!

Usually the lector sweats it out, and then the preacher simply nods to that big hard-to-pronounce list as representation of the diversity gathered, and we don't go much further.

Today let's go further.

I was going to preach a different sermon this morning,

but then I got all curious—let's call it the Holy Spirit—

when I read a piece by church historian and theologian Diana Butler Bass.

Diana Butler Bass offers some helpful questions to guide us:

Who was this group with hard-to-pronounce-names? Why were they gathered?

The Why is actually easier and there are clues right in that very passage John so diligently read:

This is a group of devout Jews who had come on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the annual festival called Shavout (Sha vu OT), or The Festival of Weeks, celebrating the new harvest and the giving of the Torah to Moses.

In Jesus' day, they would come to the Temple bringing a sacrifice of the crop (think first fruits) and some bread made from this harvested wheat.

The question of Who is a little more complicated.

Yes, they were devout Jews, but all those hard-to-pronounce place names, what do we make of them?

Maybe we should stick with the rush of the wind, and the tongues of fire, and the babel of languages!

Most of us don't pull out the map of the ancient Mediterranean world, but we could.

Diana Butler Bass did pull out the map, and she notes this:

"Parthians, Medes, and Elamites were from kingdoms and empires located in present day Iran.

Mesopotamia is roughly modern Iraq.

Judea now includes parts of Israel and the West Bank.

Cappadocia, Pontus, Phrygia, and Pamphylia now make up Turkey.

Cyrene was a Greek colony in north Africa.”

Of course, some of these names are more familiar: Arabia, Crete, Egypt, Libya.

So in our modern day we’re talking: Iran, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Crete, Saudi Arabia.

You don’t need to be a news junky to realize that this is an area of the world that is conflicted today, and has been for the last few thousand years.

My friends, when one digs in even more closely, you realize that most of the hard-to-pronounce places, had been conquered by Rome at one point or another, and many were considered part of the Roman Empire at that time.

You can figure it out area by area, but in sum Butler Bass notes:

This “is like a Who’s Who of imperial losers from the ancient world.

It is a list of double — or triple — colonized states that had formerly been colonizers.”

Then she goes on to explain: :”Within their boundaries, there were numerous foreigners, mostly people they’d conquered in the former imperial days, including Jews, who had become an outcast diaspora, at the bottom of colonized hierarchies wherever they lived.”

What’s the point? Why is this important when we could be talking pyrotechnics?

Because, when we get honest, our story of Pentecost, Acts 2, the Holy Spirit’s coming, envisions a new community, a new world, in beautiful and powerful ways, but we often miss this partly because we’re unaware, and partly because noticing the politics of that time, means noticing the politics of this time, and all this gets edgy.

Jesus had been killed, and the Holy Spirit falls on this diverse group, creating something new.

The Holy Spirit just keeps pushing,

re-ordering the powers that tried their darnedest to control everything.

Does any of this feel strangely familiar?

Thank God for the Holy Spirit, we need her now more than ever!

Curiously, at the at the Synod Assembly a couple of weeks back,

Barbara Lundblad led some of the Bible Studies.

She made a connection that is often missed.

It's a connection that resonates with Diana Butler Bass.

We cut short the Pentecost story, Pastor Lundblad said.

Our lector John so faithfully read the assigned reading, 21 verses, a labor in itself,

but that Pentecost passage actually goes on for the whole of Acts chapter 2.

Peter's sermon is lengthy, and then, at the end of the story, there are verses that may be familiar to some.

Let me read the highlights, from the end of chapter 2:

"All who believed were together and had all things in common;

they would sell their possessions and goods

and distribute the proceeds to all as any had needed.

Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Think about that for a minutes....

Barbara Lundblad concluded: "Pentecost ends too soon if we never get to the part about economics."

Beloved ones, this Pentecost story is far more powerful than we give it credit for.

I wonder if it felt like an uprising?

That day they were calling for the empire to repent.

That day they were encouraging the colonized to rise up.

That day, by the Holy Spirit's power, with dreams and visions, they were ushering in a new community.

Jesus had been killed, but they weren't done yet. It says 3000 stepped up in his place.

Goodness, Rome was stressed one by rebellious Jew,

and now, on Pentecost, by the Holy Spirit's power, they had thousands.

Pentecost is one of my favorite festivals in the church year.

Truth is, this angle I'm preaching today is new for me, too.

But it reminds me that the Holy Spirit was moving, and is moving, and will keep on moving:

inviting and calling, comforting and discomfoting,

stirring us to fully and wholly be God's people across the lines we draw,

and the powers we hold or don't hold,

in our justice making and in our economics.

May the Spirit move in you: widen your imagination, stir your fire,

and open your hearts to one another and to this world she is birthing.

Our hymn of the day is actually a prayer.

I invite you to pray it, to let yourself get lost a bit, trusting the words.

It's a prayer written in first person singular, Spirit, open MY heart.

Feel free to experiment with how you sing it, for we can also pray, Spirit open OUR hearts. Amen.