

PENTECOST
Church of the Holy Comforter
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Today is the feast of Pentecost: the empowering of the community by the Holy Spirit to become the church. In the gospel we just read, the disciples are told that Christ is leaving them in order that they might be empowered by the Holy Spirit. This spirit is referred to in several ways: Advocate, Counselor, Guide, and of course, our favorite: Holy Comforter.

The lesson from Acts starts out with tongues of fire.

My ministry in this place began with ominous signs – it wasn't exactly what you would call 'tongues' of fire

It was at I-40 milepost 166. We saw our truck slowing down, and eventually, coming to a stop.

When the driver opened the hood, flames appeared. I thought –“this can't be good –flames and gasoline can create a bit of a problem – wonder if my stuff will go up in flames.

It turned out not to be a raging fire – but just some flames coming out of a spark plug wire – the driver sprayed the flame and it was out. However the truck was stopped.

After several conversations with the Highway Patrol – they directed me to call a mechanic who came out and refitted the engine with new plugs and said to me, “Take this name and number – you may need it.”

When I looked at the card, it said - Ed's Wrecker service. I should have known that trouble was ahead.

With our new plugs installed we once again started our journey. Well we made it from milepost 166, I-40 to the middle of Statesville – I-77. That is where we were when I heard the sirens.

I look ahead and see our truck engulfed in smoke. It pulls to the side of I-77 and very shortly the fire truck arrives and folks in firefighter suits surround the truck – turns out more smoke than fire – but it was exciting.

This time the truck doesn't start – I remembered the card _ Ed's wrecker service.

Long story – short – Ed is a kind of Willie Nelson looking fellow – he has the biggest wrecker I have ever been close to, and he pulled our truck to some place in Statesville that only truck people know about.

After a number of rather comical efforts to work on our truck – Smokey --- I call it quits and head back to Winston-Salem with a promise and a threat --- I will see you here at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow and watch you load the rental truck that you are going to secure and we are going to Charlotte.

You might imagine how I am feeling the next morning as I lead our movers from 'truck town' Statesville to Charlotte. Certainly I am questioning the wisdom of my move and this assignment. Is this a sign? As I lead the truck to our new home, imagine my reaction as I am coming up Marsh Road and I see the sign that says, "Little Hope Road."

Actually I laughed out loud and said to Ringo – you’ve really done it this time old boy!

With a beginning like that, how could this have been anything but great? It only had one way to go.

In our first lesson, we hear that the disciples were encountered by the Holy Spirit and it was as if tongues of fire appeared among them and rested on them.

Out of this experience all kinds of people are suddenly empowered to understand one another. Now the only way that understanding could happen would be for them to talk to one another.

One writer says that the spirit of Pentecost was first and foremost the spirit of love --- that persons who really didn’t even know one another were brought together and even understood one another because of the power of love.

First all of these people were brought together because of their love for Jesus. They were brought together because they knew that Jesus loved them. And it is because of this love that they begin to understand one another and not let their differences stand in the way.

In fact, what happens at Pentecost is the very reversal of the Old Testament story known as the Tower of Babel – in which you will recall -- persons were, in their arrogance, going to build a tower into the heavens. God interrupts and humbles the people by giving them different languages so that they do not understand one another and the tower falls.

Now, at Pentecost, that process is reversed – people of different languages understand one another.

What does that say to us? Well, it says a lot of things. It says that the church of God - the church you belong to - was born out of the power of the Spirit. It was not born out of correctness and politeness, but it was born of love.

The church of God was born out of fire and wind and people talking in foreign tongues, but being understood. The church of God was one in which, and is one in which the estranged are now joined - that which was foreign is now made familiar.

Last year on Pentecost, we talked about interruptions - How the Holy Spirit came and interrupted the assembled followers of Jesus. They were empowered by that interruption.

Interruptions are often very powerful, sometimes destructive, and sometimes wonderful. Interruptions are often irritating and cause us great discomfort. Interruptions are also those things that often end up defining our lives or who we are. God interrupts the scene and the situation and causes great change to occur.

Actually, as a community, we know something of interruption - -- do we not?

That's right! We have been interrupted from our "business as usual" normal way of doing things here at Holy Comforter.

Last year, I reminded you that we had lost our rector and associate rector – two key leaders of our parish. At that time we were about to tear down a building that we had 'temporarily' had for over forty years.

The question then was -- In the middle of all this transition that can be unsettling and uncomfortable – what is going to happen? Are we going to be all right?

Do you suppose that the Holy Spirit could be part of this endeavor?

How do we know if the Holy Spirit is present in this time of interruption?

Do you remember how Jesus came and interrupted the disciples when they were locked up in fear after his sentence of capital punishment had been carried out? They were frightened and isolated – they were hiding behind locked doors, yet Jesus, now resurrected comes among them and their fear is overcome.

When Jesus talks with his disciples, he tells them that even in his absence, wonderful things will happen because the Father will send an Advocate – a holy comforter -- to empower them to do greater works than even Jesus has done.

Perhaps we will have our own anxieties relieved if we remember that God’s calming and life-giving spirit is present and with us -- if we will but take the time and patience to pray for it and find it.

My coming among you began with a smoking truck on I-40 caused by a rather puny flame from a spark plug wire. After several breakdowns and even an ominous warning of “Little Hope...” I learned that God’s Holy Spirit of love certainly existed in great capacity in this place named for that loving spirit ---- Holy Comforter. I learned that the community had a vision that would overcome difficult economic times, and other stresses.

I witnessed Christ's love being offered in the hospitality of this community. I experienced the depth of the community's faith as I saw commitment turn into bricks and mortar and new walls and roofs began to appear. More importantly, I saw the love of Christ become present as the community – the Holy Comforter community began efforts to be more inclusive – reaching out beyond the normative culture and language we were used to and extending hospitality to those who were different in language, culture, and experience – that process continues.

In my life, I have learned that the interruption of travel and the inconvenience of mechanical breakdowns are not outside of God's gifts of patience and humor – most importantly, I learned that the smoke coming from a spark plug wire can become Holy Smoke by encountering God's people in a place named for God's comforting and life giving spirit: Holy Comforter.