

## **Pentecost B – May 31, 2009**

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

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*Acts 2:1-21    Psalm 104:25-35, 37    Romans 8:22-27    John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15*

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Shortly before I completed my pastoral internship in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, I heard the strange story of the little town of Centralia, Pennsylvania. I became so fascinated that I spent several hours researching the Centralia mine tragedy on the Internet.

Now I'm going to assume that there are maybe a few people sitting here in the congregation today, who – like me – are unaware of what happened to this little coal-mining town in Eastern Pennsylvania. Those of you who know the story, I hope you'll bear with me.

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Back in May 1962 a fire began in a landfill in Centralia. What no one realized was that there was an exposed vein of anthracite – a particular sort of coal – in that landfill, a remnant of a long-abandoned coal mine. The vein of coal caught fire. The fire eventually worked its way underground, burning through the vein. Despite a few abortive attempts to put out the fire, it *still* burns under what used to be the town of Centralia.

What was once a busy little town of 1,100 people is now home to only 9. Despite the dangers posed by this ongoing fire and offers of government assistance to relocate, these people refuse to leave. The ground continues to collapse over burnt-up coal deposits, and toxic gases spew forth from cracks that open up in the ground.

There are approximately 3,700 acres of coal under Centralia. The fire has been burning for over 47 years. And, it's thought that there's enough fuel for the fire to burn for another 1,000 years.

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Now, there's another fire that's been raging here on earth, this one for nearly 2,000 years. This fire was kindled on the day of Pentecost described in today's reading from Acts. And it's a fire that continues to burn brightly in the hearts of Christians throughout the world.

The fire underneath Centralia – much like the annual wildfires in California and the American West – has brought only destruction. But the fire that burns within the hearts of all Christians is a very different sort of fire. This fire brings LIFE. This fire, which is the Holy Spirit, is what teaches us about Jesus. This fire enables our confession that Jesus is Lord.

Back on that first Pentecost nearly 2,000 years ago, about 120 of Jesus' followers were gathered together in Jerusalem to celebrate the end of the Festival of Weeks. It was one of three holidays on which Jews were expected to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It was a day that commemorated the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai.

In the book of Exodus we read that when Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law, "Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire."<sup>1</sup> This is the very same sort of miraculous appearing of God witnessed at Pentecost. While the disciples were gathered in celebration, God's presence came upon them as a rushing wind, and tongues of fire rested on each of the disciples.

Then the disciples began to speak, each one in their native language. This speaking in tongues is not to be confused with the tongues of which Paul speaks in his first letter to the Corinthians. This was not a heavenly language each spoke, but the languages of their native countries.

Those who were previously divided by language – like the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel – were suddenly united in the Holy Spirit. Those who previously could not understand one another began preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ in a way that others gathered for the Festival could hear *and* understand. This was the fulfillment of the prophecy of John the Baptist: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*"<sup>2</sup>

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Each of us has this fire burning within us. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism. And, like the fire in Centralia, it is a fire that destroys. But this is a destruction in which we can rejoice! By being joined to the death of Jesus Christ in baptism, the old Adam in each of us has been put to death. This old Adam, according to the Law being commemorated on that very first Pentecost, deserves death and destruction.

Through the Law given at Mt. Sinai, we are convicted of our sin. The Law does not have the power to restore life. As the Apostle Paul says, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”<sup>3</sup>

But through the power of the Holy Spirit, we **are** brought to faith in Jesus Christ. The Law brings us to repentance. We receive God’s forgiveness, and the power of sin in our lives is destroyed. The old Adam dies. Paul says, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”<sup>4</sup>

Today’s lesson from Acts shows us what our new life in Christ should look like. For the Spirit of God poured out on Pentecost was a Spirit on a mission – a mission to unite God’s people. It was a Spirit which, on that day, undid the confusion of languages imposed at the Tower of Babel. It was a Spirit which reunited God’s people.

While Pentecost is often thought of as “the birthday of the Church,” the Church was already a community which was marked by word and sacrament gathered around the risen Jesus. The real meaning of Pentecost is that, through the Holy Spirit, now every member of the Church is empowered to bring the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world, so that all may call upon the name of the Lord and be saved. The real meaning of Pentecost is *mission*.

All the disciples gathered at Pentecost were gifted through the Holy Spirit to speak. And what word did they speak? They preached the Good News of Jesus Christ.

This is the same gift we all receive through the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism. The gift of the Spirit is not just an individual gift, bringing life only to the baptized. It is a spirit of mission, to go out and preach the Good News so that all may be united in Christ.

We tend to think of preachers as those of us who stand up here on a Sunday morning and bring the Good News of God's love and salvation to the gathered congregation. But according to Luke's account of the first Pentecost, *all* on whom the Holy Spirit is poured out are empowered to preach. The real gift of Pentecost is not only the gathering of the believers in Christ in the Church; it is being empowered through the Holy Spirit in the Church to spread across the world in mission to bring all people to saving faith in Christ.

As those who gathered for our Lenten study on sharing the faith learned, Martin Luther said that, "Everyone, by virtue of baptism, is called to preach." We are all expected to preach to our neighbor about God's mighty acts, and the love shown us in the death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

But, oh! What a hard thing this is for us to do! Haven't we all been taught that the two things one doesn't bring up in polite conversation are politics and religion? But the Apostle Paul again reminds us, we have not been given "a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love."<sup>5</sup>

So my prayer for you today, brothers and sisters in Christ, is that you will trust in the power of the Holy Spirit which has been placed in you at baptism. This Spirit has been fed and renewed in Holy Communion. Let the fire which burns within you well up and burst forth. For it creates not only new life in you, but in all with which it comes in contact. So go forth today, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and speak that word of life.

Amen.

[1,475 words]

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 19:18

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:16

<sup>3</sup> Romans 3:19-22a

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>5</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7