

Pentecost – May 23, 2021
Text: Acts 2:17-21
Theme: “Blood and Fire and Vapor of Smoke!”

Today is the Day of Pentecost and we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to send the Spirit when he ascended into Heaven, and 10 days later, the Spirit came while the disciples were in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Feast of Weeks, which became Pentecost for God’s people. So, although there was a name change, Pentecost was not a new festival. The Hebrews had been celebrating it since their exodus from Egypt about 1200 years before. They celebrated for a week of weeks, or roughly 50 days, hence the word Pentecost which means 50th day. They gathered together with grain offerings after the harvest and celebrated all that God had done for them. He had poured out so many blessings upon his people and they took the time to stop and thank him. That’s why everyone was in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit arrived.

When Peter spoke to the people, he used as his sermon text the Prophet Joel.

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the

heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Joel was prophesying the end of the world when God will destroy the earth. So, it causes me to wonder why Peter quoted him on the day of Pentecost? It seems as though Pentecost was a day of happiness and celebration of all the good gifts that had been given by God. Joel seems like an awfully dark text for such a celebration. Well, here's why I think Peter chose the prophet Joel. The day of Pentecost was not only celebrating the gifts of a good harvest but also the gift of freedom to enjoy the good harvest. Remember that our ancestors were slaves in Egypt for 400 years. God freed us from slavery in Egypt and raised up Moses to lead us to the Promised Land, which took another 40 years. Sometimes people just want to forget the bad stuff that happens like being enslaved as a people. But I think that 400 years of enslavement made God's people who we are, and so God intends for us to remember it and to remember how he freed us from it.

To help them remember that we had come from slavery and were freed miraculously by God, God instructed our ancestors to have times of Sabbath and times of Jubilee. Before the institution of the Lord's Supper,

our ancestors gathered to celebrate the Passover, the night they were protected from the Angel of Death as the first- born male child and the first-born male of every herd and flock in Egypt were killed. That was what pushed Pharoah to free our ancestors and they celebrated that freedom every year during the Feast of Weeks, but times of refreshment and thanksgiving were not limited to once a year. Every 7th day was the Sabbath and people were instructed to rest from their labor and remember why they have the gift of rest in this life. Every 7 years, they had a sabbath year in which the land was rested and no planting went on freeing even the land from the tyranny of constant production. Then after a week of sabbath years, the fiftieth year was a year of Jubilee when all slaves were freed, all debts were forgiven, all land was returned to the original owners and all slates were wiped clean. We can hardly imagine this way of doing things. Imagine, in the 50th year everyone moves back to their ancestral home. We have become such a transient people that I'm not even certain where I would end up. But it worked for our ancestors who had a tendency to live in the same place for many generations.

This model also made for a very different way of thinking because it encouraged God's people to see nothing on this earth as permanent. Like the American Indians, God's people did not think they owned any land. They just used it for a while. Nor did they own any people. People only served them for a time. There wasn't really even any real debt because it

was all forgiven every 50 years. As God's people, he expected us to see life on this earth as a temporary state of being until the real life in paradise with God began.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel to remind the people that they had lost sight of this reality. They had been so caught up in thinking that they were running and owning the world that the Messiah came among them and they not only missed him completely, but they crucified him. They had rejected him because they didn't want to give up the system they had built, the system that served their worldly passions and had become comfortable for them in many ways.

We hear these words from Peter and Joel again today as we celebrate Pentecost, as God's people have been doing for more than 3,000 years. The world has been ending since Jesus ascended into heaven and promised to return for us. If we ever needed a reminder of that fact, Covid19 and the 2020 election cycle were certainly billboards for us. Everything we think we own will be ashes. Everything we think we have built will be destroyed. All our money will be as useful as a big bag of sand. "Blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes..." But the Holy Spirit is here to draw us close to Jesus so that we do not lose him in all of the day-to-day hoopla. The Holy Spirit is here to strengthen our faith through Word and Sacrament and to draw us back to God's path

again and again through repentance and forgiveness. Our year of jubilee is coming when we will have no debt, no slavery, no rulers imposing humanly contrived laws upon us and we will truly be free, not just for a year, but forever. The Day of Pentecost reminds us that we are but strangers here, heaven is our home. We are only passing through until the great and glorious day when our Lord returns for us. The Holy Spirit will keep us until that day, guarding us, feeding us and enlightening us. That's his fulltime job until Jesus returns.

Even though this text from Joel is dark, it is also comforting. Just as the things of this world will be turned to smoke and ash, the converse is true of the things of God. The people who our brothers and sisters through Holy Baptism will be our brothers and sisters eternally. That joy we experience especially on special days like Christmas and Easter will not be for an hour or a day but eternally. The God who we know now will be fully revealed to us and we will be united with Him in a way we cannot fathom yet. These are the wonders to which Pentecost points as we make our way to the real Promised Land which is the complete fulfillment of the one our ancestors inherited.