Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:25-35, 37

Romans 8:14-17

John 14:8-17, 25-27

Today we commemorate God sending the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ disciples. Today we give thanks for the many ways in which God’s Spirit teaches us and reminds us of all that Jesus said.

Today we pray that God will continue to bless us, sending us the gifts of the Holy Spirit. May we find within our parish community wisdom and understanding, knowledge and counsel, fortitude, piety and the fear of the Lord. May the Holy Spirit lead us into all truth. May we see visions and dream dreams. May we put aside our troubled, fearful hearts and boldly proclaim God’s love made known to us in Jesus Christ, his son.

In Scripture and tradition, God’s Spirit is mysterious, powerful, surprising. The Holy Spirit comes upon the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the feeble. God’s Spirit was present at the beginning of creation, hovering over the waters, and the Spirit continues to be present today, creating a new heaven and a new earth. The Holy Spirit raised up prophets and preachers from the earliest of recorded history up to this present day. God’s Spirit is with us right now - in mystery, in power and in ways that might surprise us.

As we heard in today’s first reading, at Jesus’ Ascension, the disciples were told to return to Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the God’s Spirit. “…you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; (Jesus said,) and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." What better way to get started on this great witness adventure than to be in in Jerusalem, on the major Jewish feast day of Shavuot, also known as Pentecost – 50 days after Passover. This festival commemorates God giving the Torah, the first five books of Hebrew Scriptures, to God’s chosen people. This Jewish feast was one of three annual celebrations during which the people would flock to Jerusalem to celebrate. So the city was filled that Pentecost Day, with all sorts of visitors. The list of nationalities that we heard in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, reminds us of the expansiveness of the Roman Empire…the whole known world at that time. So from an upper room in one small city in a very distant province of Rome, the Apostles could preach to the whole world on that great festival day. But first they needed to gather an audience, and boy did the Holy Spirit take care of that.

The people who were gathered in Jerusalem for that festival, were accustomed to the sounds of a crowd. But they became bewildered when they heard something like a rush of violent wind, yet didn’t see anything. There is no report in the Acts of the Apostles about downed trees or a funnel cloud or a dust devil. But these folks knew that something was going on, so they hurried to find out what all the noise was about. The narrator of Acts tells us that the disciples of Jesus were the focus of this noise, for God’s Spirit had come upon them powerfully, and tongues as of fire rested on each of them, and they spoke in the native languages of all those people gathered round. The disciples weren’t babbling or ranting or raving. They were proclaiming the mighty acts of God, shown forth in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. All those gathered heard this Good News. They heard it spoken not only to their ears, but more profoundly to their hearts, in the language they would have first heard at their mother’s knee. What a powerful impression this preaching must have had on the first Christian Pentecost, for Luke tells us a bit later in this story that over 3,000 were baptized on that day. And from that time forward, we Christians have devoted ourselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. All this because God’s Spirit came into the midst of Jesus’ disciples, just as Jesus had promised. And that same Spirit dwells in our midst today.

The Holy Spirit was sent not only to teach us, but also to encourage us and empower us, so that through the use of our individual gifts and talents the body of Christ might be built up. Being a Christian is not about creating our own little kingdoms; kingdoms that isolate us from each other, kingdoms that offer no lasting security, kingdoms that are often meant to impress others, but more often instead cause confusion and doubt. Being a Christian means being part of a community, a community that fervently prays, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven”; a community that joyfully shouts out, Come, Holy Spirit! Come.

During the Easter season, that has now ended, we heard how the lives of these first Christians were changed, changed by the power of God’s Spirit. Each week we learned how these newly emboldened disciples broke down the barriers that focused on human pride, and instead built a community that was focused on God. This continues to be the challenge that faces each successive generation of Christians, including us. What are those barriers that we need to break down today? How can we build up this community and the communities outside these walls, in the name of Jesus? How is the Holy Spirit prompting us to new life, life that goes beyond our expectations?

“In the mystery of fire and wind, language and understanding, the fearful disciples were converted to the work that God had always been doing. This is, of course, Jesus’ work: (and our work too) to love as God loves, to gather and unite, to forgive and raise up. The community gathered in that room on Pentecost could articulate every kind of reason not to go – lacking the right words or training or free time or money. Yet they were suddenly and miraculously inspired, despite themselves, to act just like Jesus. The Spirit embodied in Jesus now filled their bodies – the Body of Christ.”1 And we too are part of this body of Christ. How is the Spirit filling our bodies today? What inspirations are we receiving? What is the Spirit calling us to do?

Come Holy Spirit, fill our hearts and enkindle in us the fire of your love. Grant us your special gifts: wisdom and understanding, council and fortitude, knowledge and piety, fear of the Lord.

Encourage us. Empower us to be faithful witnesses to the Good News of God in Christ, not only here, in this place, but to the very ends of the earth.

1. Bradley E. Schmeling, Christian Century, May 28, 2014, p21.