

Pentecost 2018
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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It seems a little strange to talk about Christmas in May but bear with me. Throw your mind back to December—lots of snow and the anticipation of the coming Christmastide—Jesus in the manger, kids in costumes, friends and family gathered in warm houses—all the usual wonderful rituals we associate with that time of year. I was feeling particularly festive because I had received my Christmas present early. My mom bought us tickets to see Handel's Messiah at St. Josaphat Basilica. We got dressed up and drove through the snow for what promised to be a gorgeous evening of music.

As we sat in the Basilica, I thought about all the families who had sat in that space, worshiping God through the generations. And I thought about the immigrants who had risked so much to leave Europe and to start a new life in Wisconsin—and how the church was a connection back to home. As the orchestra tuned up, I found myself thinking about the voice of God speaking and even singing in that holy space.

The concert began. The soloists were magnificent, and the orchestra was electric. We listened to famous proclamations about the birth of the Messiah and how this child would bring peace to the earth and the new reign of God.

And just as I am being transported up into the mind of God, the woman behind us and to the left begins to talk. Loudly. I can see her out of the side of my left eye. Perhaps there was a problem and she needed to say something, I thought. Or maybe she would stop it in a minute. But no. She talked and talked and talked through almost the entire first half of the performance. I looked back, and she was scrolling through Facebook and showing her friend, presumably, pictures of cats or something of the sort. At this point I am furious.

And I did something that I almost never do. During intermission, I walked over to the woman and, as kindly as I could manage, which wasn't particularly kind in the moment, I asked her not to talk during the second half. She apologized and agreed, and to my delight, I was able to really listen to the second half of the performance. For the next hour, my mind was filled with stories about God and the saving work of this little child born in Bethlehem all the way through the kingdom of God and its arrival on the last day. And of course, then she sang Hallelujah, and we all rose to our feet. It was a miracle to hear clearly. It was heavenly.

I've been in church services where today's story from the book of Acts is read in lots of different languages. I can see what they're doing, but I think this tradition is a little bit silly. As I read our story today, the miracle of Pentecost is not that people were speaking in different tongues. Rather, the miracle in my mind is one of hearing. All of a sudden, people from every nation, creed, and tribe could hear one another perfectly, where before there had just been noise and gibberish.

And there is a lot of noise in our world, friends. Think about the shriek of missiles, the bombast of heads of state, and the general static of ratings-bating blather that fills the airwaves. These make it so difficult to hear God.

Today, though, we celebrate a miracle that happened in the middle of another noisy city. We celebrate a day when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven in a rush of fire and wind to cut through the regular babel of life. And the disciples' ears were opened. And they heard one another as clearly as they heard God.

What if I told you that same fiery Spirit comes down whenever Christians gather together? What if I told you that the power to really hear one another and to really hear God is ours? Would you be inclined to believe me?

I can't help but believe it when I look out at all of you this morning. You are the disciples. You are the church. You are the ones whose ears are open to one another, to God, and to the world. The trick of these Bible stories is that they keep happening. The Holy Spirit comes down to us constantly.

"The crazy disciples who could hear one another and were filled with the holy spirit" was too long of a name to everyday use. And so, instead, the Holy Spirit hearers called themselves "church." Today is our birthday.

How are we going to celebrate? Now that our ears are opened and we can feel the power of the Holy Spirit, what is next? I think that is the question of the entire book of Acts. What do we do now? I want you to think for a second, specifically, about somewhere in your life where you could act like someone filled with the Holy Spirit. Think about it. Is there a place in your community, your workplace, your neighborhood, your city, that needs you? I have a feeling that there is. I imagine there is a place in this world that is longing for the gifts that you have to give. Maybe you have a passion for justice. Maybe you have a passion for children's well being. Maybe you have a passion for music. Maybe you have a passion for preaching or studying God's word. I don't know what that gift is for you, but the promise of Pentecost is that our ears are open to hear the needs of the world, and we are filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit to get the job done.

There's not a Plan B. There's just the one plan. And that plan is the church. That plan is you. You are empowered for the healing of nations, the bridging of gaps, the hope of the poor. There's no one else.

It is easy to despair of the problems of the world. I know that I do sometimes. But despair is not a gift from God. It's a byproduct of our human nature. Hope is the gift from the Holy Spirit, and there is nothing that a group of hopeful people cannot accomplish when the Holy Spirit fires us up.

The Holy Spirit is always a gift, and the Holy Spirit is always a task. Rejoice today. Happy Birthday. Get to work tomorrow. Amen.