

Pentecost sermon
St. Cath 2024

I love Pentecost because it is a reminder, when with think that our faith is just about words or ideas or abstract things, that it is rooted in natural elements.

Pentecost is in some ways the birthday of the church and like a cake full of candles made large, it is a celebration with powerful elements of wind or breath and fire.

And when human beings, who the story tells us are made from earth, sing the words of creed to remember our baptisms -Air, Fire, Earth and Water are all present. -and not just in the story but in our lives and even our bodies.

“when the day of Pentecost had come, they were altogether in one place...”

For Jews Pentecost or Shavuot was and is a festival 50 days after the Passover. To celebrate grain harvest and giving of the torah

The festival includes instructions that harvesters should not cut all the way to the edges of the field, not pick up bundles that are dropped but leave them for those who are hungry

So the background to today’s reading from Acts is this festival of Wheat and Word with land-based food justice at its core.

Wind/Breath

suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind

One of my colleagues in the wild church movement, Ragan Sutterfield, describes this holy wind this way:

In both Hebrew and Greek, wind and spirit are the same word. Disciples were gathered for a festival of word and wheat, the harvest of plants grown from soil--breathing carbon, exhaling oxygen. Those plants gone to seed, passing on their life to another season’s crop and in their abundance there was a harvest of bread for planters and gleaners and seed for birds and field mice and the life upon life that lives close to the

ground. It was at a festival for all these interactions, joined with a celebration of the coming of the Torah, the story of a God who breathed life to soil.

Into that festival that God sent the Holy Breath, the person of God in gaseous form. The world had lived from its first days from respiration, God like a bellows breathing into it all. Psalm 104 says:

*You send forth your Spirit [Breath], and they are created;
and so you renew the face of the earth. (v.31,)*

All of those exchanges of gas, the plants trading carbon dioxide and oxygen with animals, the anaerobic processes beneath the mud releasing methane, all were involved in a greater exchange with the God who made all and breathed all into life.

We call our age the Anthropocene, because of the impact of the human impact on earth. Forces our industry or automobiles or flying have breathed a breath that means not life, but death for the world. We call this breath “carbon”, but it is simply the breath of living beyond our limits.

It is into this world of deathly exhalations that the Holy Breath comes.

Fire

And fire!

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them,

Our fire today and the fire of Pentecost echoes other biblical fires.

The burning bush

a pillar of fire

Animal offerings burnt on altars

a fiery chariot

Prophets who call down fire from heaven

The refiner's fire

the disciples who said: Were not our hearts burning within us?

The risen Jesus cooks fish on a fire.

Fire brightens, warms, purifies, it is a sign of God's presence
Life on earth as we know it is warmed by the fire of the sun and made possible by plants who turn that fire into food.

But fire can be powerfully destructive

Today is the 44th anniversary of the eruption of Mt. St. Helens

There are currently 10 wildfires burning out of control in BC
In BC the worst ever year for fires happened in 2017, 2018, 2021 and 2024. Last year in August meteorologists and fire experts declared it the worst year for wildfires in Canada on record - there were months of the season left.

And we know that fire and air are connected.

I can still remember the wonder of that childhood experiment of a candle covered by a jar, my astonishment that the flame had been feeding on something invisible

It takes the breath away

Language

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

I used to think this verse said—"fire, like tongues." But it really does not. It says tongues as of fire, and a tongue on each one of them.

This short passage contains six Greek words about language: speechmaking, tongues, languages, idiom, dialect, native language...

The natural elements that I love are important but this passage it is mostly about language.

Each person hears not just in the words that they know from birth but the expressions and metaphors, the sayings the cadences

The Holy Spirit comes with a powerful affirmation of diversity; a message of inclusion that the Church celebrates every year.

BC has 60% of Indigenous languages in Canada—32 languages and 59 dialects.

But as of 2018 only 5% of FN people are fluent in their language, and half of those are over the age of 70. The best-off languages are described by linguists as “severely endangered” with fewer than 1000 speakers.

A few years ago I heard a young Tahltan man, talk about protecting—the “Sacred Headwaters” where the Skeena, Nass and Stikine rivers arise, from coalbed methane exploration. -this area north of Prince George is where many fires are currently burning -so again gas/breath and fire.

He spoke about the relationship between land and language. When he his grandfather answers the question “how are you?” He used to understand the answer as: “I’m fine, I’m happy” now that he is learning his language (Na-Dene or Northern Athabaskan) he understands it means –“it is beautiful in the landscape of my mind”

The idea that a person’s interior landscape and the health of traditional territory are profoundly connected, well-being of people is connected to wellbeing of land is I think, essential in what can be frightening times

Hope

We live in the Anthropocene, in the time of climate crisis, mass extinction, every summer we experience “*fires and smoky mist*” as Peter quotes the prophet Joel

But we can look to the wisdom of today’s scriptures as we navigate this time

each one heard them speaking in the native language of each

The miracle of Pentecost is not that persons from all the known world and language groups could understand a crowd of Galilean hillbillies, but that each person heard and understood God’s deeds of power in vocabulary, expressions, and grammar that had meaning for them.

This event, like the prophecy from Joel, is an incredible affirmation of diversity and inclusion: “*I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your*

sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17-18).

Young people are occupying university campuses to stop the war in palestine, in climate justice Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg and Jane Godall, primatologist in her 90s speak out together.

After today's passage, Acts goes on to describe the early church sharing all things in common. Luke's vision is a handful of committed, Spirit-filled, ordinary folk as seeds scattered by the Holy Wind to transform the face of empire into the face of God's Beloved Community. Not of a grand, dramatic overturning of the oppressive world-system, but of small circles of Spirited sojourners living out a different vision in their local places of dwelling.

I wonder how we at St Catherines are called live this vision in this place, blessed and brought alive by breath and spirit, the fire in our hearts and the Living word.

Amen