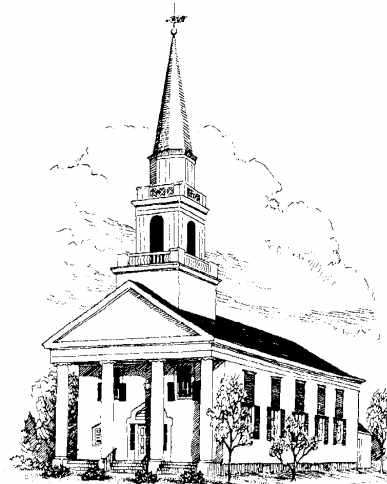


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from May 11, 2008
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Filled With the Holy Spirit”

Scriptures:
Numbers 11:24-30
Acts 2:1-21



Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunami waves, even cyclones seem to fascinate us. Their destructive force seems to come out of nowhere to wreak havoc upon human beings and upon Mother Earth.

21st-century media coverage and its immediacy gives us an almost instantaneous glimpse into the devastation caused by natural disasters of all sorts even as we remain safe and at a danger-free distance. We human beings seem drawn to watch those raw images of destruction and disaster. This week has certainly been no exception.

Many of you have seen this week the terrible images of death and destruction brought on by the cyclone in Myanmar (previously known as Burma). Many of you have seen pictures of the devastation caused by the eruption of a volcano in southern Chile which surprised everyone in coming awake after 300 years of dormancy. In an instant the world was turned upside down by these tremendous releases of powerful energy through water, air, fire, and earth.. What is left behind in their wake are almost unrecognizable landscapes and entirely devastated communities.

These events call us to a new respect for the immense power that resides in the natural forces of this world—power so real and so dangerous on occasions that it astounds our sensibilities and disturbs the routine of our daily lives. These sorts of natural disaster disturb us even when they happen on the other side of the world or in another hemisphere.

These sorts of natural disasters do change our lives. While science may help us to understand the systems behind these sudden releases of energy, we continue to be caught by surprise by their many manifestations. We are reminded by such events of the fragility of our existence within creation. We may even have a certain sense of survivors' guilt, as a result of not being subject to such devastation.

Today, on this Pentecost Sunday, we come to examine and celebrate an entirely different kind of power. Today, we examine and celebrate a creative power of an altogether different dimension and magnitude. On this day, we celebrate a similarly awesome power. Today, we celebrate an awesome power that does change our lives and a creative power that enriches our

lives and fills us with the divine spark. We remember that Jesus promised just before his death that God would send a comforter and advocate which would accompany us and provide comfort for us throughout all our lives. Today, we look at and reflect upon the awesome power of the gift of the Holy Spirit!

You noticed in our first scripture reading from the Hebrew text that God's Spirit was not new to this earth after Jesus' death. The Holy Spirit did not make its first appearance after Jesus' ascension. There are many examples of and testimonies to God's Spirit present in the world from the beginning of time. Yet Jesus did promise us that God's Spirit would come upon us in a new and more total and comprehensive way after his ascension.

The Spirit of Pentecost that rushed into the world (as if out of nowhere) on that amazing Pentecost day so many years ago is the same Spirit of God that pours out on each of us as disciples even today, even here and now on this day. Our Greek reading from Acts tells us that the gift of the Spirit came to the gathered crowd both individually and collectively, both as personal followers of Jesus and as his body, the church.

The emphasis here is that the Holy Spirit came to them *all*. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit came when they were gathered together as a body and yet the fire rested on each one separately: together yet separately; as a whole body and as individual parts.

Some might say that the Christian church was born in a chaotic event. Others might say that the Christian church was born in a Spirit-drenched or Spirit-filled event. However you call it, devout Jews had gathered that day to celebrate an annual first-fruits-of-the-harvest festival (a *shavuot* festival), a regular annual Jewish festival.

The normal order of that festival day was shattered by the "rush of a violent wind" which filled the space which the crowd occupied. The normalcy of the day was interrupted by the abrupt appearance of flames dancing above each of their heads. The normalcy of the day was shattered by a cacophony of voices lifted in praise.

Suddenly, an ordinary festival celebration became extraordinary. People knew immediately that something different was happening and it's really no wonder that people sneered and jumped to the wrong conclusion that folks had already been partying hard that morning.

Nobody expected this amazing show of power. No one expected a strange and strong wind or flames dancing over their heads and nobody knew what it really meant either. Nobody, including the disciples themselves, had any control over what happened when everyone started speaking in their native language. They were all further flabbergast because everyone heard and understood the Gospel being explained in their own particular language.

Of course everyone was surprised and a little shaken up. These events defied all logic, all order and all control. It was the disciple Peter who made the connection that the words of the prophet Joel were being fulfilled that day—prophetic words that had predicted that God's Spirit would be poured out on all human beings and that many remarkable things would happen once that Spirit came amongst us. On that first Pentecost, God fulfilled a prophetic word that

one of God's previously inspired prophets had spoken. God was making it clear on Pentecost that the Good News was for all people and that God's Spirit was for everyone.

As our quiet reflection mentions:

"The celebration of Pentecost beckons us to keep breathing. It challenges us to keep ourselves open to the Spirit who seeks us. The Spirit that, in the beginning, brooded over the chaos and brought forth creation, the Spirit that drenched the community with fire and breath on the day of Pentecost, this same Spirit desires to dwell within us and among us." (Jan Richardson, The Painted Prayerbook, Word and Image and Faith)

What is critical about Pentecost is not that the Spirit of God came to earth that day; rather that the same Spirit that had been around since the beginning of all time, that same power came to dwell among us and in us and that the Spirit is available to each one of us. Now that's good news! And that is news that may startle us still!

The text tells us that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit—not just a few chosen ones, not just the followers of Jesus, not just his select group of disciples. On Pentecost we human beings were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

What does that mean for us? It means that the promise that came on that first birthday of the church is that each one of us may call on God with confidence. It means that each one of us are recipients of the grace of God. It means that each one of us contain in us the power of the Holy Spirit. It means that the power of God's Holy Spirit can and will empower each of us to bigger and better things than we could possibly imagine on our own!

And, sure, you can shrug it all off as so much bunk. You can shrug it all off as so much exaggeration and sound and fury. You can shrug off today's story about Pentecost and say, "That's all well and good for those who gathered there so long ago but such things don't happen today. Such things aren't real for me."

But what if this story is not bunk? What if the power of God's Spirit is real and available to each one of us? What does it mean for you to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Does it mean for you that your life might need to change? Does it mean that God has a plan for you that you have yet to discover?

Someone has put this question to us in this way:

"Without the Holy Spirit, God is far away, Christ stays in the past, the Gospel is a dead letter, the church is simply an organization, authority a matter of domination, mission a matter of propaganda, the liturgical services no more than a reminder of the past, Christian living a slave morality. But with the Holy Spirit, God is with us, the universe is resurrected and groans with the birth pangs of the kingdom, the Risen Christ is here, the Gospel is the power of life, the church is the organism, the body of the Living Christ, authority is service, mission is Pentecost, the liturgy is both memorial and anticipation, human action is God at work in this world." (Online source)

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit seems to have been gifted to us in a new way on that Pentecost so long ago. Yet that outpouring of the Spirit has never stopped. Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th-century mystic and poet, once wrote that “*We are all sparks of the divine flame.*”

We may think that we have stopped seeing those sparks. We may have stopped witnessing to those sparks in our midst. Yet the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has not stopped. We are, each one of us, sparks of the divine flame.

Can you see the sparks? Can you feel their energy coursing through you, even now?

Let us go out this day and dare to access the gift of that divine spark in us. Let us go out this week to use that spark, that Spirit is us, for good. Let us use that Spirit to help others. Let us use that spark to support the weak, help the afflicted, and honor all persons. Let us use that spark within us to love and serve God and rejoice in the power of that spark! Amen.

(Acknowledgement is made here to a sermon entitled The Day of Pentecost by the Rev. Mary H. Ogus.)