

“Lights! Camera! Action”

Isaiah 44:1-7; Acts 2:1-21

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus
June 8, 2014 – Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

What happened that first Pentecost? Something certainly took place which filled Jesus' followers with such a power that they would never be the same again. From that day, and that experience, the Church was truly created.

A noise from the sky like a strong wind blowing... flames of fire that seemed to touch each person present... believers speaking in languages that weren't their own...A crowd gathered asking each other, “What does this mean?”

Even though we have the advantage of time and perspective, we still look back and ask, “What does this mean?” Because we live in a scientific age we may also wonder, “How did it happen?” It's surprising no one has made this transforming event into a film. The special effects alone would guarantee its success.

As dramatic as the wind, fire, and proliferation of tongues may be in this story, we should not let its staging overshadow its meaning. Something life-changing takes place here. Often we get so caught up with the packaging of something, that we lose sight of what's contained within it.

Glendon Harris, a pastor and writer, relates this little autobiographical incident: “As a small boy I will always remember the high excitement caused in our town when it was announced that the President of the United States was coming through the state and would make a five minute whistle stop in our small town. You can imagine the preparation that went into that brief five minutes, for not many celebrities came through, especially the President.

“On the appointed day, the depot was festooned with red, white and blue bunting, the high school band and the veterans' marching unit and color guard were there, as well as every man, woman, child, and dog for miles around.

“The popcorn wagon was also there, and as a small boy with a big appetite, I was very much interested in that popcorn wagon. You know what happened? I got so interested in the popcorn that the President came and went and I didn't even see him.”

Harris tells that story as a way of illustrating that we can easily get distracted by something intriguing, something flashy. And when that happens, we can miss what's really important at the moment.

I think that particularly applies to our scripture from Acts this morning. The story of Pentecost has all the trappings of an exciting drama, a movie spectacular, but if we see only the theatrics then we miss what else is involved.

Peter takes the first turn at interpreting what's happening. “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, listen to me and let me tell you what this means. Here is what the prophet

Joel spoke about when he said, 'This is what I will do in the last days. God says: I will pour out my spirit on everyone. Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. "'

Then Peter continues: "Listen to these words, fellow Israelites. Jesus of Nazareth was a man whose divine authority was clearly proven to you... God has raised this very Jesus from death, and we are all witnesses to that fact. He has been raised to the right side of God, his Father, and has received from him the Holy Spirit, as he has promised. What you now see and hear is his gift that he has poured out on us."

Whatever the believers expected on that day, they clearly got far more than they had anticipated. They experienced a power surging into them that transformed them from a directionless gathering to a powerful force. The work begun by Jesus was now being transferred to them. It was theirs to do, but not without help. God's spiritual presence was starting to be felt in such a way that they were empowered in their witness.

From that point on the Christian Church really began, and its history shows spiritual intensity permeating it time and time again. The Spirit is really the bridge between God and us. It is the link which connects with the divine spark in each person and brings it to fulfillment. The Spirit activates the dormant seed inside and causes it to grow and bear fruit.

We're inclined to think of that Pentecost as a dramatic, but dead event, from the long-ago past. But I tell you that is the farthest thing from the truth. What happened then, happens now. Perhaps not in the same form, but with the same substance.

The Holy Spirit flows through this room right now. Maybe not as tongues of fire coming down out of the sky, but as fire in our hearts. Maybe not as a loud wind rushing, but as a sure movement in our souls. I can't explain how this happens; that's beyond my understanding. But I can point out the obvious: it does! You know that, too.

For those sensitive to the workings of the Spirit, you don't need a big spectacle to confirm its presence in our lives. We don't require Hollywood to bring in a cast of thousands. The Spirit can also walk on gentle feet and slip into our daily lives, and into our worship, in quiet but powerful ways.

The Spirit will not disappoint us. It came once with astonishing strength; it comes again today. It is what we remember and celebrate this morning. First, though, we must be open to it. We must be alive to its possibilities.

A young boy once stopped to look up at a bronze plaque in a large downtown church. "What are all of those names up there?" he asked one of the ushers.

"Why those are the names of people who died in service."

"Well," thought the boy for a moment, "the 9:00 service of the 11:00?"

Come, Holy Spirit. Come again, and find a receptive place within us. Awaken us, lead us to new possibilities, and empower us for Christ's work in the world.