

**Pentecost Sunday
May 11, 2008
First Sunday - New Sanctuary**

Happy Pentecost. Happy Mother's Day. Happy birthday. Happy rebirthday. Happy baptism. O happy day. O happy day.

Christmas is wonderful and Easter is fantastic but really, truly, this could not have been any better if we had planned it the entire time, which we certainly did not. Pentecost may rank third on the hierarchical totem pole of Christian celebrations, but here at St. David's, it is the top of the heap. For us, it is more than the story of the beginning of Christianity and the birthday of the church. It is more than a story of flames and wind and the presence of the Holy Spirit when the disciples so desperately needed her. It is even more than the story of how Christianity would spread to all corners of the globe. Pentecost is more than all of that to us because it is personal. For us, Pentecost is not just the story that Mary just read to us from the Book of Acts. Pentecost is OUR story. It is virtually word for word the story of each of you. That's why it is more important to us than even Easter and Christmas.

The story of Pentecost begins in emptiness and fear. It is about

a people whose hopes have been dashed so many times that they have hidden themselves away from the world. Their leader has been killed and they are afraid to even be seen in public, for fear that they too will be killed. The whole experience has left them disillusioned, lost and feeling abandoned. Their hearts and their lives are filled with emptiness and despair.

Those are the exact emotions that Jean and I discovered in the huddled few here at St. David's when we arrived. Time after time, the leader of this community unexpectedly left or was killed. Every time the community had reason to hope, their hope was dashed again in disappointment and loss. Most had long since given up on St. David's, unwilling, with good reason, to put themselves through any more pain and loss. In addition to the emptiness and abandonment issues, they were full of fear. Fear that it would happen again, fear that St. David's would be shut down for good, fear that the overwhelming pressure of the other religious communities surrounding them would drown out St. David's once and for all.

All of those reasons to be afraid were totally justified. Because as I soon would learn, they were all absolutely true. The other

churches in this town were actively trying to shut down St. David's. They wanted us gone from here and they had already petitioned the diocese of Arizona to shut us down and sell the property to another church. In addition, I would learn after the fact that Jean and I were sent here on the six month plan. If something dramatic didn't happen at St. David's in six months, the parish would be shut down. Fear and emptiness were the order of the day with good reason.

In our wonderful story from Acts, something finally forces our scared little puppy disciples out of hiding for a day. It is the Jewish feast of Pentecost, a spring harvest festival. The disciples must have thought that they would be safe, interspersed among the rest of their fellow Jews gathering in Jerusalem for the celebration. But once they are all together for the very first time since Jesus' death, something happens. As they begin talking to one another, there is a common theme in each of the conversations. I imagine it happening something like this; "You know, I have to tell you, I have had the strangest feeling soon after he died. It feels like he is still here with me. I don't mean like the way I felt my husband's presence after he died, but something even beyond that. He felt palpable, real, like he was actually here."

Whereupon the other disciple would say, “You’re kidding. I have felt the exact same way. It’s as if he was right here with me.” And then suddenly everyone in the crowd started realizing that each of them were saying the same thing. This unbelievable moment of epiphany is described in our text using the metaphors of wind and fire, two symbolic ways to represent God’s presence all the way back to Moses on the mountain.

At St. David’s, we too would come out of hiding for our own special celebration. In our case, it was the arrival of a new, green, idealistic deacon, right out of seminary. On the second Sunday that we gathered together, this wet behind the ears deacon would ask two tiny little girls named Adrienne and Catlin to join him up on the altar for the preparation of communion. And suddenly, a sound like the rush of a violent wind went through that space right down there where our new kitchen now sits, and it filled the entire church in which we were sitting. I looked up to see tears streaking down the cheeks of the faithful gathered before me, and it was as if tongues of fire rested on each of their heads.

At that moment, just like in the book of Acts, everything changed

here. All of us were suddenly and immediately filled with the Holy Spirit and our fear and our emptiness dissipated. Just like the disciples, we would begin spreading the message and mission of Christ, to everyone around us. Like the disciples, we would stop worrying about ourselves and start caring for those in desperate need all around us. We would begin boldly preaching a Gospel of love and compassion not just to our own, but to all of God's people and all of God's earth. And though we were often speaking a different language that people in Page had never heard before, they understood us anyway. And they came and they came and they came.

Before, St. David's had figuratively and literally disappeared behind the tumbleweeds of Page. But suddenly, not only were we alive, but we were visible to the whole community, just like the disciples experience today. Now, instead of us being afraid, it was the people around us who suddenly seemed filled with fear and anxiety. And just like the people surrounding those first Christians on Pentecost, the people around us started saying, "what the heck is wrong with those people over there?" In as Pentecostal a term as possible, the stoic people next door actually called us "the church on

fire”, though I’m not sure they meant it in a positive way. Others sneered and said, “look at those idiots at St. David’s. They all act like they are drunk.” Pastors in town started mocking us and writing nasty things about us in the newspaper, accusing us of not only acting drunk but having new fangled ideas. Despite what the Pentecost story clearly says, we were told that it was heretical to preach that people of all cultures and faith could come and worship God together despite our differences. They told us and all of Page that it was ridiculous to believe that Cretans and Arabs, LDS and Catholics could experience the Holy Spirit together. They told us that church was supposed to be about like minded people coming together to defend themselves against the sinful culture surrounding us.

Instead of shrinking from these attacks, all of you were emboldened, responding that no, we aren’t drunk at all, but we are filled with the spirit. We were empowered to proclaim the good news, despite those who attempted to disparage us for doing so. And as if to prove our point, we began to be prophets in the city of Page and points beyond, telling everyone who would listen to us that St. David’s is the place where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like and

everflowing stream. We would stand up for the stupid and the crazy and honor them with dignity and respect. We would care for the widow and the orphaned and bring them safely home. And just like those first days of the first church, we too would grow exponentially, not as a church of sameness, but rather one where people came from every faith and background and tradition. We would become the universal church envisioned by Jesus and brought about by the Holy Spirit, right here in Page America.

We honor the Pentecostal roots of St. David's on the front cover of our service bulletin each week, noting that "We are one in the Spirit". And in the tradition of those early Christians who formed our church on this very day of Pentecost, we have spread the Gospel far beyond Page, being recognized in national news stories and national magazines. If ever there was a church formed in the image of that first Pentecost, you are it.

This glorious day has come about because all of you continue to be willing to live without fear, to boldly state who we are to your friends and neighbors, to step out and claim our theology proudly in our newspaper articles and in the way we live our daily lives. It is by

continuing to live in the realization that the Holy Spirit is present in a real and personal way with us in the midst of this wonderful community, that you continue to be honored by people like Linda Watt, the Chief Operating Officer of the Episcopal Church, who has referred to all of all as the model of what church can be today. It is by continuing to live in the spirit of Pentecost, that we bring new members into our midst, like Larry Allen, David Oliver, Kiera Oliver and Alex Wood, who we will welcome into this communion through the wonder of baptism in just a few moments.

It is your willingness to continue to live in the Spirit, the spirit that created the space in which we now celebrate, that will also allow us to receive more people into this church at our dedication next month.

When the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit on this incredible day, their fear subsided, their emptiness was filled to the brim and they created the largest and most diverse church the world has ever seen. My dear, dear friends, these beautiful walls will be a constant reminder to us that we too will never ever again live in fear, that we will always be filled, that we will always be in the midst of

Pentecost, not just today, but every day we walk into this building.

With the disciples of Jesus, this day of Pentecost becomes their moment of initiation into a life of community. As individuals, they may have felt Christ's presence in their life, but when they come together, their lives are transformed. They become a unified community of diversity, a body that will change the world.

It is the same for you and me. Together, as the community of St. David's, the Spirit fires us up to be the change we want for the world. In this moment of ecstasy, let us pray that each and every one of us will not just be filled with that Spirit, but continue to feel a sense of urgency to bring the fruits of that Spirit to all of God's people and all of God's earth. That is our commission. That is our vocation. That is the heart and soul of Pentecost and this unbelievable community of St. David's. Let us go forth, burning with that fire, and continue to change the world. O happy day. Amen.