

Setting The Scene

The festival which drew them to Jerusalem. This holiday is called Shavuot, or “weeks,” but is also known as festival of reaping and “Day of First Fruits” It is significant in two ways: as the end of the Harvest festival and to commemorate the anniversary of the day God gave the Torah, or law, to Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. This feast is just seven weeks after Passover, when the Last Supper took place; the counting of 50 days (the “pent” of Pentecost) is understood to express anticipation and desire for the giving of the law. On Passover, the Jewish people were freed from their enslavement to Pharaoh; on Shavuot they were given the Torah and became a nation committed to serving God. The harvest aspect begins with the harvesting of barley during Passover and ends with the harvesting of wheat at Shavuot. Although these would have been times of joy and anticipation for most Jews at the time, it surely was a period of anxiety and hopelessness for the disciples.

So, remember, they are gathered for this feast, but are probably uncertain and anxious. Jesus has ascended into heaven at this point and they are most likely feeling alone. The disciples were aware that the Holy Spirit had come upon Jesus at his baptism, and worked through Jesus during his ministry. Jesus had promised them an advocate, that somehow the spirit would be passed on to them, they were just not sure how.

In a minute we are going to hear a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It is a very dramatic reading with lots of imagery. Isn't it interesting that Luke has the spirit come during this festival—harvest and the Law. Luke wants all to know that Jesus is that abundant harvest, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, and now Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit to strengthen us as his disciples.

Symbolism of Wind and Fire

Both wind and fire are powerful forces of nature, which can be either positive or negative, constructive or destructive.

Fire What is fire capable of doing? Purifier—destroyer—light—warmth—protection—transformation—burning—passion—injury

Wind What can wind do? Clear away—blow apart—noise—movement—activity—freshness—windburn—supply power (sailboats, wind turbines, etc) - great power—force—creates waves—whirlwinds

I would now ask each of you to identify with either the fire or the wind symbol and move over to sit together in the section designated; Families need not stay together.

Now, let's look at some Biblical images of fire and wind

Fire images—flaming swords of angels; the flaming wheels around God's head in the Book of Daniel; the burning bush where Moses received the Ten Commandments, which ties in with that feast of Shavuot

Wind images—the Lord answers Job out of a whirlwind; God's wind moved over the face of the waters in creation; God formed man of dust and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...Both Arabic and Hebrew use the same word for breath and spirit (ruah); also note the wind/breath continuum—relationship between fire and wind—fire not possible without air. Also, John the Baptist prophesied both fire and spirit.

The Holy Spirit resembles both fire and wind in many ways: active, restless, powerful, moving, fluid, purifying. This movement of God heralds a new action of God in the history of salvation.

Notice, also, the symbolism of being able to understand each other even when speaking different languages—the Church now has a worldwide mission.

Response of Disciples

How would you have responded to the fire/wind experience of the disciples? Running away? Cowering? Drawing back? We can certainly imagine the disciples doing these things. They didn't have a very good track record of bravery or loyalty—such as their fear in the boat with Jesus during the storm, Peter's denial of Jesus, their flight from the foot of the cross. But this was before they encountered the reality of the Holy Spirit; encountered it in ways they could see, hear, and feel. As human beings, our bodies are important pathways to encounter God, and thus the physical nature, particularly through touch of each of the Sacraments, along with the sights, smells, and sounds of the liturgies which accompany them.

Instead of cowering, the disciples were energized, cleansed of their fear and doubts, the path of their mission now clearly illuminated. They experienced that Pentecost event as a group and then act as a group, with many different tasks, but as a community. The power of the Holy Spirit makes it possible for the followers of Jesus to do what he did. In this sense, the early community at Jerusalem enjoys a kind of prophetic succession. The Spirit of God is operative at creation and is seen as being present in warriors and prophets. The Spirit worked through Jesus and now the Holy Spirit has descended fully upon God's Church.

Wrap Up

The birth of the early church did not mean that the disciples were going to have it safe or comfortable—they were being sent out into a world where they would experience trouble. But, they knew that they were not alone, the same Spirit that worked through Jesus would help guide them. The Holy Spirit was the force that allowed the Jesus movement to continue and made it possible for the church to flourish. The Holy Spirit carries on the work of Jesus in the Church. The Pentecost experience moved the disciples to respond to that prophetic gift with missionary action. The Holy Spirit is the expression of God's boundless love. It is about relationship and connection, it bridges the gap between man and God. It was true for the apostles and early followers of Jesus and it is true for us now.