

It's an Uprising!



Every year on Pentecost Sunday in liturgical churches like ours a very anxious church member (the one who couldn't get out of reading this particular Sunday) approaches the pulpit to present the traditional story of the birth of the church at the coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' disciples from Acts, chapter two. Anxious, because shortly into this scripture they are faced with the names of a string of difficult to pronounce nationalities that goes something like this...

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the part of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.

Rarely does a liturgist get through the list without stumbling. Congregants often sympathetically giggle. So, this year I simply left the string of nations out of our reading, although I am sure that Thalia would have been the exception and gotten the pronunciation of each one spot on. But, having made this deletion, I began to ponder, who these people are, why was it important to the author to list each one, and why were they there in the first place.

Why were they there? The text tells us that devout Jews were gathered in Jerusalem for a festival, Shavuot or the Festival of Weeks. This festival is held fifty days after Passover and celebrates both the wheat harvest and the giving of the Torah to Moses.

Who were they? They were devout Jews from across the ancient Mediterranean world. Most of these kingdoms had been conquered by Alexander the Great and incorporated into the Hellenistic world until recently, when they had been taken over and occupied by Roman troops. But, before all that, most of them had been significant powers in their own right and often at war with each other. They had all formerly been colonizers and now they had all been colonized...once, twice, perhaps three times or more.

Why was it important to list each nation? You see Acts 2 is more than the story of the birthday party of the early church, it is an anti-imperial story, a political dagger aimed at the Roman Empire, and a threat of a new provincial rebellion...an uprising that sought to be empowered by a risen Jesus and fueled with spiritual fire. You see later in the scripture (verses 34-36 and not in today's reading) this sermon ends with Peter recalling King David,

"The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." And, that my brothers and sisters is hardly a conventional birthday speech.

These hard to pronounce nations didn't see this occasion as just the birthday of the church...a nice day to be celebrated with Holy Spirit balloons and cake in the fellowship hall. No, according to church historian, Diana Butler Bass these conquered and occupied countries saw it as a "clarion call for empires to repent, the colonized to rise up, and for both to forge a new community in the fire and wind of the Spirit. The empire might have killed Jesus, but the struggle continued...and on this day, three thousand rose up in his place. Where Rome had one rebellious Jew, they now had thousands."

This was a grass roots uprising of people from many nations that must have threatened the Roman occupiers that witnessed it. The target was Rome, the oppressor who even oppressed

former oppressors. Rome had built a world of war and woe for the vast majority of the nations listed in Acts 2. Pentecost birthed a community of God's peace constituted on an ancient day of gratitude for both wheat and the word...there couldn't possibly be a greater contrast.

The people who gathered in Jerusalem were not free. They did not have the protection of religious liberty. They made their journeys in the shadow of crucifixion, where one controversial rabbi of their own had been executed by Rome. And there were rumors of a missing body and strange appearances.

If we understand who was there and why, another miracle of Pentecost we hadn't considered comes into focus. All of these people who had been demeaned, enslaved, oppressed, and brutalized by Rome stopped being afraid. These folks from diverse nations who had been at war for centuries and whose ancestors had tried to destroy one another, realized, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that they weren't enemies at all.

Yet, there was an enemy. The enemy, Diana Butler Bass says was, "Caesar, the imperial force that had for generations inflicted trauma upon them and their homelands through military might, political manipulation, ethnic superiority, and economic control." But, now they had an Advocate, the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit had been unleashed and poured out over "all flesh" including their colonized flesh.

So, during this season of Pentecost let us remember that this thing called "church" was born in the fire of anti-imperialism and an uprising of the colonized into a community of holy resistance that embodied solidarity, peace, freedom, and equality in this world.

And, remember that during Pentecost as we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church...let's not forget the Parthians and all the rest who were there!

Peace,

Pastor Paul

