

Acts 2: 1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.⁷ Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?⁹ Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning.¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:¹⁷ "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

At This Moment

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Acts 2: 1-21

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The movie *Amistad* tells the compelling, true story of a slave ship which was captured in American waters in 1839 after those on board who had been forcefully taken from their homes on the west coast of Africa seized the ship from its crew. Cinque, a large, strong man from the Mende tribe who was the first to break his chains to lead the revolt on-board ship spoke no English. He had a difficult time trying to communicate with the New England lawyers that were hired by abolitionists to free the captives and send them home. Eventually, an interpreter was found who could help translate for Cinque.

The case moves through the lower courts and then is sent to the US Supreme Court for a final decision. Although slave trading is against American law by 1839, the Court must decide whether these African people are property and therefore belong to the individuals who captured them or belong to Spain under whose flag the ship was sailing. Or are they free people who should be allowed to go home? The case got the attention of former U.S. President John Quincy Adams who was coerced into arguing it before the Supreme Court.

In this very moving scene when the elder statesman and the courageous liberator meet face-to-face to discuss the upcoming appearance before the high court, Cinque through his translator says to Adams, “We won’t be going in there alone.”

“Of course we won’t,” says the former President, “We have rights at our side — we have righteousness at our side!”

“I meant my ancestors,” says Cinque, “I will call into the past. Far back to the beginning of time. And beg them to come and help me at the judgment. I will reach back and draw them in to me. And they must come. For at this moment, I am the whole reason they have existed at all.”

“At this moment, I am the whole reason they have existed at all.”

At this moment, in this place gathered here in Havertown, PA to once again worship God, we are the whole reason that our faith traditions have existed at all. If we call upon our traditions they will come to us. And they are, in some ways, as important to us as anything else that we know or learn.

Tradition — the sum total of all that has gone before us in our faith history. For example, though the earliest Christian writers, such as Paul and the author of Mark’s Gospel say nothing about the birth of Jesus, we accept as Christmas tradition what Luke and Matthew recorded for us based on the traditional stories circulating in their early Christian communities. Down through the years that tradition has been modified and adjusted to reflect present day custom and practice.

Jesus was often challenged about why he didn’t follow Jewish tradition to the letter of the law. After all, these traditions had been handed down, added to, revised, and adjusted to reflect Jewish understanding of God’s will for the chosen people. “John the Baptist’s disciples fast and pray,” argue the Pharisees, “but yours break tradition and eat and drink.” “Why do you sit at the table with tax collectors and sinners?” “Why do you pluck grain from the crops on the Sabbath?” “Why do you think it’s okay to heal on the Sabbath?” A breaker of tradition this Jesus was. And the religious status quo challenged him for it.

Traditions. We’ll hold on to some traditions forever even after they’ve outlived their usefulness. But realistically, traditions have to flex and change or they become useless. Yet there are some traditions that we must never lose hold of because they teach us into the future. There are some traditions, some things as Cinque reminds us, that exist just exactly for this moment right now.

For example, it has been modern Protestant tradition to teach our children in the same way that we were taught — go to Sunday School in your nice, clean clothes, girls in dresses, boys in jackets and ties, sit in a circle on the floor or around a table and listen to the teacher read stories and then work on your take-home paper.

That was the tradition in which I was raised. (Ask my Mom, she happens to be here today. I looked very cute in my dress shirt and tie – even if my cowlick wouldn't stay down.) But it has become more and more clear that children are not getting the Christian education they deserve and during recent decades the church has not been doing such a great job passing on the story that was given to us.

Does it even matter anymore if our children go to Sunday School? If one's decision to be committed to Christianity is made as an adult when you join a church, why do children need to learn in their early years?

I read a book about the Ohio River Valley of the late 1700's and the many conflicts that arose between those Native Americans who had lived there for generations and the European colonists who now wanted to live there. It's an historical novel – partly in fact it is a history of some of the ancestors from whom I descend on my dad's side. It uses primary sources such as diaries and letters to piece together a larger, complete story.

There is one point in the book which tells in detail of an event that happened in August of 1780 when a renowned Seneca by the name of Cornplanter escaped a party of white settlers that was rescuing captives that a Seneca raiding party had captured previously. In the note that helps explain the story, the author tells of a man named Ira Marsh who was interviewed in 1850, 70 years after the event and that Marsh at one time had as a neighbor a man named Benjamin Williams who had lived on the Cold Springs Reservation with Cornplanter and, writes the author, “who once possessed the Cornplanter Narrative.”

The “Cornplanter Narrative” is what intrigued me about that line in the book. This author writing in 1995 had read an interview taken by someone in 1850 who told of a neighbor who possessed the “Cornplanter Narrative” and was able to corroborate the events of 1780. Two hundred and fifteen years later, a story was still alive.

If our children don't learn the “Jesus Narrative” — the God-story if you will — from us, then who will they learn it from and who will keep it alive? Scholars, academics, theologians? Don't count on it. Our faith must be passed on from one generation to the next, person to person, story by story, word by word, action by action, life by life.

That's what the Church is supposed to do. That's what we as parents and grandparents are supposed to do. That's what we as the corporate body of Christ do. That's what has kept the Jesus-story alive for the past 2,000 years and has kept the Israelite story alive for thousands of years before that.

The tradition of neatly pressed dresses and starched shirts on our boys and girls has lost its value; the tradition of transmitting the Jesus story to the next generation has not.

The disciples were following the traditions of their foreparents when they gathered once again for the Pentecost celebration – what is known in Judaism as *Shavuot* which our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate even today. It commemorates the giving of the five (*pente* in Greek) books of the Torah. They gathered in Jerusalem as was their tradition yet the gathering changed a bit to meet the changing needs of those Jews who considered themselves Jesus Followers.

Suddenly, the logistics of the tradition became less important than the substance, the content, the context, of the event. Something happened that caused those gathered to understand the message despite their cultural and language differences. The followers of Jesus experienced something remarkable that they

could only describe as a rush of wind and tongues of fire, something that they believed just had to be what Jesus had promised them as he departed. They were changed. The traditions of the past that had brought them to this point now were less important than the fact that they were united together in God's presence. And they began to pass the message along to the generations which followed.

It was because of that moment that we are here today. It was for this very moment now that that Pentecost moment came to be. "At this moment," Cinque would tell us, "I am, [we are] the whole reason they [our ancestors-in-faith] have existed at all."

Perhaps Cinque knew the teaching of Mamadou Kouyate "Sundiata" in *An Epic of Old Mali* (1217-1257) who wrote, "I teach the kings of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old but the future springs from the past." We must learn from the past so we can teach the children of our future.

It is, in fact, that scene I continually thought of as we prepared for this week's trial of the Heeding God's Call 12. As I sat in the courtroom with the other HGC12 defendants, I heard Cinque's words and I thought about those of my faith ancestors who have been in the same place – Dr. King, the Berrigans, Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rosa Parks – it was for that moment that they ever existed at all. And I could stand confidently on the rightness of my decision because of them.

The Pentecost moment is a moment of faith tradition for us but we have let it in some ways become a dry tradition which no longer serves our present in a way that moves us to the future. For some reason we've become afraid of Pentecost – "It's for the holy-rollers and charismatics, not something that reasoning Christians are into." Somewhere along the years we've lost the fire of those flames and the movement of that wind.

It is now time to reclaim it and pass it along to our children and grandchildren. It is a piece of the Jesus narrative that must be shared – maybe not in the same old traditional ways of the past, but it must be handed down.

What is it that we have to pass along?

It was a bitter cold Sunday in 1947 when the pastor of the Methodist Church in Gatewood, Oklahoma got up before the sun to build a fire in the pot-bellied stove in the middle of the sanctuary. By the time the people arrived for Sunday School, the building was nice and warm. As the pastor was starting into his sermon, the front door flew open and in ran Mildred, a tiny woman who lived across the street from the church. Gasping for breath, she screamed, "The church is on fire! The church is on fire!"

The pastor wisely ended his sermon and everybody dashed outside. From a safe distance they looked and saw that sure enough smoke was billowing up from the roof and it appeared the building would become engulfed in flames at any moment. Wondering what to do, the people were startled into action when Mildred suddenly shouted, "Let's save the stuff!" She ran back into the church and some men followed after her.

Once inside, they discovered that the pews were fastened to the floor by long screws. There not being enough time to find screw-drivers, Mildred started yanking the pews loose from the floor. Although she weighed only 90 pounds, she just grabbed those pews and ripped them right off the floor. As soon as she would get one loose, the men would carry it out.

When the pews were all out, Mildred went for the piano. She picked up one end and three men picked up the other and they carried it out. Finally after a garden hose had put out the fire and the emergency was over the pastor went over to petite Mildred from across the street and thanked her. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he said, "Mildred, I've been here five years, and this is the first time I've ever seen you in church. Why haven't you come before?"

Mildred looked up at the pastor and responded with all sincerity, "Reverend, this is the first time that your church has been on fire!"

I tell you this because that's what is going to take the church – universal and local – into the next century. It's not just about numbers, not just about filling the pews with people, but it also means filling us and this building with whatever it is that makes people say when they hear about us, "That church is on fire and I have to be in the middle of it!" Part of it is attitude, part of it is marketing, part of it is invitation. All of it is the evangelism that comes out of the Pentecost experience.

It's all about the fire of Pentecost and it's all about spreading the good news. That's what I need you to think about beginning today. How do we take the traditions of the past – that which has existed so that we might be here at this very moment – take the traditions and remold and retell them for the children and grandchildren that will take the Jesus story into the future? How do we spread the good news, how do we let the Mildreds of the world know about the fire that's here?

There is Pentecost fire here at Hope UMC. The question is, can we let the Mildreds of the world know it so they will come bursting through the doors because they just "gotta" have it? The fire here is not always going to be as obvious to those outside as smoke rising from the rooftop, so we have to figure out how to let people know about the fire that's here, we have to fan the fire, spread the good news. And that's what our program this afternoon is going to start us talking about – Growing Hope. Vision, numbers, money, direction, mission, invitation. It's all about Growing Hope.

The Pentecost fire is in the hearts of you who come here week after week, searching for clues about your relationship with God. The fire is here in the Gospel that has been proclaimed from this pulpit since 1799 when Ebenezer Church first formed in

Philadelphia, from the pulpits of Bethesda, and Covenant, and Trinity Churches who all came together to become Hope. And I think the name "Hope" is no accident – it is what we are about moving forward. There is fire here on this corner in the middle of Philadelphia's suburbs. There is fire and hope in the lives of everyone that is a part of this community of faithful.

You know what's going on here. You know what the fire looks like at this church. Maybe the fire is not as big as it once was, maybe we're afraid that it's about to be blown out, maybe we're not always sure what we need to do to fan the embers and get the flames back. But the point is, the fire is still here. If it were not, we would not be sitting here together this morning, 50 days after we celebrated and welcomed 10 new members at Easter. If the fire were not burning we be elsewhere doing other things.

We must, though, go tell the Mildreds of the world about the fire that's here. At this moment, we are the whole reason that the fire of Pentecost has existed at all. Let us share it and grow the flames into the future so that the next generation knows at their moment why it is that we have existed at all.

Amen.