

The old Zion Gate in Jerusalem is ravaged by shells from mortar fire from the War of Independence. A gate made for pedestrians, today, a Mercedes negotiates with pilgrims to pass through the narrow arch, marked at the bottom from too many close scrapes with fenders. Nearby on Mount Zion is Dormition Abbey, the reputed site of the death of the Virgin Mary. If you continue walking up the alley past the abbey, you come to a site that is revered as the tomb of King David. It is starkly lit by bare fluorescent bulbs and unadorned. Visitors are separated by gender, and are sent into two small, separate rooms to visit and pray. Three young Orthodox Jews enter on the men's side and dance in a circle while chanting in Hebrew. Others pray facing the old fabric covering that conceals the tomb.

Upstairs is the site believed to be that of the Last Supper, and according to tradition, the place where The Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost:

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

A little further than our reading goes, the Tomb of David is referred to by Apostle Peter, who also spoke the Pentecost sermon:

“Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried and his tomb is with us to this day.” (29)

Parts of this ancient room are covered over with Romanesque architecture built by the Crusaders. Other parts of the public areas reach back to the time of Jesus and beyond.

As we entered it a couple of weeks ago, feral cats were the only occupants. One member of our group picked up a small, gray kitten and rubbed its belly. It then scampered up an ancient staircase with no handrail. A black and white mother cat appeared from a doorway that led to nowhere at the top and watched as an orange stray stood, stretched and strolled slowly away from our group. There is an air of desolation to the antique ruin, with its broken walls through which green vegetation struggles to bring life and frames vacant windows, which stare out at more dry, hot stone beyond.

That something so spectacular as the first manifestation of the presence of a Holy wind, a flame of living Spirit could have rushed through such a dry, barren place, changing the way people viewed God and their ability to understand each other is hard to imagine...here in a stone-filled room where worn-out pilgrims in t-shirts leaned against walls two stories tall, drinking water from plastic bottles and shading our eyes from the sun with baseball caps that even bore the name, “pilgrim” on each brim.

And different pilgrims we were—each with our own understanding of what our Christianity meant, and how to be bearers of it in the world. When Catholics tour in groups, they visit this place in solemnity and ritual. Pentecostals come to this place to celebrate the event from which they take their name and fall to the ground shouting and speaking in tongues, and guards are on hand to come and cool down the enthusiastic crowds.

Some groups (as we discovered) pay attention to the words, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,” and see this place and this event of Pentecost

as a sign that prophecy is being fulfilled in the end times. Others of us look at the event through the lens of what was happening at these increasingly difficult days before Jerusalem fell, the hope people extended for a Messiah that would rescue them, the consequent radical message of Jesus that came instead, and how his chroniclers understood what it meant to be followers of “the Way” for us to interpret today.

In any case, the events that may have happened in this room were understood as so many different tongues speaking one language. For Christians today, universal language is hard to find—yet there has to be a greater common denominator behind it all, and in fact there is—in the belief that we are all a part of a creation that is limitless.

Garrison Keillor was once asked by Newsweek to list his top five books, and before the Steinbeck and the Cheever, he listed as number one, “The Acts of the Apostles.” He said of the people who gathered on that first Pentecost, “The flames lit on their little heads and bravely and dangerously went they onward.”

And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language what others mean or imply when we try to speak across the chasms of ideology, politics, gender, race, sexual orientation...nationality? We have so many more ways of conversing today. Are more forms of communication better or worse? Today, the Parthians might e-mail the Medes, cc’ing the Elamites while bcc’ing some of the Mesopotamians, who in turn might have sent “tweets” to the Judeans who could blog about it for the Cappadocians. These in turn might have texted to the people of Pontus and Asia. The Phrygians could post their status on Facebook to the Pamphylians, while the Cyrenians could post on MySpace for the Romans. The proselytes might have selectively used the old-fashioned mail to communicate their message, while the Cretans and Arabs, removed from the communication, might just have shown up blindsided and uninformed.

But this is not how the Spirit moved that day of Pentecost, and it is not how it moves today.

No, this was the place that was spoken about through the prophet Joel, where God declares that God will pour out God’s Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams.

The movement of the Spirit that is spoken of on Pentecost, is about finding the, “I-Thou” relationship within the church and in our relationships in general. It is the spirit of respect, of forgiveness—the spirit of love. I believe that Spirit is moving here in this church—I have seen it stumble clumsily and then rise bravely and maturely to the occasion. Let’s keep *that* Spirit moving amongst us. A place where young people shall see visions, and older ones shall dream dreams calls on its people to keep a higher vision of a Christian community that welcomes and respects all, no matter who they are and no matter where they are on their faith journey; particularly by taking the higher road on that journey.

Someone once said that from within comes the breath of life, and in the breathing in and breathing out comes a connection to something greater that we name as “Spirit.” The word, “Ruach” is a Hebrew word used throughout the Old Testament, and it means, “breath.” As coming from God, it is translated as the invisible origin of life. The word, “ruach” is also then translated to mean “spirit.” Thus were the violent winds of Pentecost that rushed through a large courtyard room on Mt. Zion identified with the Holy Spirit.

A couple of years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, spoke about Pentecost. He said (words to the effect) that the experience of feeling that there is a sense of the Spirit of Creation around us makes sense to people. For these first pilgrims to the room where the Last Supper was said to have taken place, they could go out and take the message of peace and

reconciliation and begin to build bridges with strangers as well as with each other where there were hurt feelings or divisions.

Willams said that “Friends of Jesus” discovered that they can communicate to all kinds of people that they never thought they would be speaking to. What they learned about the ministry of Jesus can be put into very real actions as part of a church community that can be understood by others as being right and good in our relationships with each other.

He concluded by saying that “It is the Spirit that gives us the gift to speak in prayer, and it is the same Spirit that gives to us the ability to communicate effectively, christianly with each other.”

The room where it is believed that the Pentecost story took place is hot and dry with missing mortar and stone. Feral cats meander in search of food from tourists. Woody vegetation springs from cracks in ancient stone in a persistent demand to bring life back to the parched places.

Preacher and author of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” Phillip Brooks, wrote, “We never become truly spiritual by sitting down and wishing to become so.” The challenge is to push through the hard places to bring the continued promise of life, green and good, to a world in need of our own spiritual gifts, in community and as individuals, so that our young people may see visions of what might be, while others may dream dreams.

No one knows where the Holy Spirit goes, but we see the trail it leaves behind. (Robin Mann) Amen.

Scripture for Sunday, May 23, 2010

Acts 2:1-21

1 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.’