

Acts 16:9-15 Psalm 67 Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5 John 14:23-29

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

In a couple of weeks, we will celebrate the Day of Pentecost, which commemorates the moment when the Apostles first truly understand that it is God's Holy Spirit which, in fact, "keeps" them. Just as Memorial Day comes around each calendar year to remind us of the men and women who have fallen in service to our country, and their commitment to the preservation of freedom in a world endangered by tyrants and violence, so, too, does Pentecost serve to annually remind us of the Spirit's presence in our midst. When I say that it was on a particular occasion that the Apostles truly understood the work of the Spirit, I mean that they had begun to see that God was blessing them each moment of every day; that they were being sustained by God's own breath; that they were being strengthened, encouraged, and inspired by opening their hearts and minds to God's Holy influence. God's Spirit had been there since the beginning, moving to and fro over the waters of creation, available to all God's creatures who would receive it, and finally these early students of Jesus recognized what was going on and knew they were being called to proclaim it.

Personally, I like to think of the Holy Spirit this way: It is the expression of God's intent, which is so full of life and so intense that it sweeps across and through the world, bringing its life to all, and connecting all who share that intent of God. In our scriptures about those early years after the Resurrection of Jesus, we are shown how his teachings begin to take hold among his followers as their lives are transformed by this new understanding. Among other things, they begin to fully grasp Jesus' teaching that his mission was to all people, not just his Jewish family, that his teachings were meant for all, that God's kingdom was meant for all, and that God's holy breath filled the lungs of everyone. As we heard from John's Gospel this morning, Jesus, as he is sitting at the last supper with his disciples, promises that "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." And by "you", he means "you-all", the whole human family.

Now, the disciples may have thought that he meant just 'you' of Hebrew extraction, you who have thought of yourselves as God's chosen flock, but they learn that God's blessings aren't exclusive to them. Over and over we hear in the Book of Acts, that they were amazed that gentiles, non-Jews, are just as receptive to God's Spirit. Imagine if today we thought that only baptized Episcopalians were able to receive the Spirit. Or Roman Catholics. Or Baptists. Or Americans. Or Men. Or Women. It takes some time, and some mind-bending astonishment, but the disciples, now Apostles, come to understand just how far-reaching the Spirit's influence is. They come to find that God's powerful intentions are universal. On the Day of Pentecost, they are struck by the enormity of their mission. Their calling to proclaim and teach is compelling; it is universal; and it is urgent.

But, before we celebrate the Day of Pentecost, there is another church holy-day on our calendars: The Day of Ascension. That happens this coming Thursday. Ascension Day marks the taking-up of Jesus, the Resurrected Jesus, into heaven to be with God the creative Father, to share the eternal throne we've heard about in the Book of Revelation. On the calendar, this happens forty days after the Resurrection event and the discovery of the empty tomb. Jesus, risen from the dead for all to see, has spent these days among his disciples and followers, and now must claim his rightful and powerful place in the heavens. Let me read to you some extra scripture this morning about that event:

"After suffering the crucifixion, Jesus presented himself alive to his apostles by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from

them and was carried up into heaven as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Jesus has already warned them of this. Even back before the crucifixion, he cryptically told them 'I am going away, and I am coming to you' (as we heard in today's Gospel lesson). What, coming and going at the same time? I think that the disciples, bless their hearts, may always have been little puzzled by what Jesus was teaching them. I think maybe we all are...

But that brings us back to our readings from the Book of Revelation. John is taken by his guiding angel up to the summit of a high mountain and is shown just how Jesus comes back into the world...at the center of a new city, a gift to the world coming down in a cloud, where Jesus will share the throne with God Almighty for ever and ever. And in that new city there is no darkness or evil, no drought or famine, nothing unclean or accursed. And its gates will always be open to those who wish to live in goodness. And I wonder, is John being given a glimpse of God's dream? Is this revealing, guided vision wishful thinking, or something which could really happen? Is God permitting John to see these things so that all of us who hear his report will be motivated to share God's dream and work towards its coming true? Is that the calling which we should all be hearing? Jesus has conquered death and risen from the grave, and now promises us the Pentecost experience of receiving the Holy Spirit; is all that meant to inspire us to hear and act on our callings, callings which will contribute to the building of this new city, this new Jerusalem?

Now, St. Paul had a profound calling, as we heard today in our reading from the Book of Acts. St. Luke, the Book's apparent author and one of Paul's traveling companions, writes that God, through the Holy Spirit, has called Paul to go, of all places, to the Roman colony of Philippi in northern Greece. He has a vision and inspiration that he needs to preach the good news of Christ to the people there. BTW, our reading selection skips over the part where Paul has intended to go to Asia Minor, and has made plans and preparations to do so. But God has different plans for him, and denies him access. It's more important for him to go to Philippi, Paul sees his opportunities for mission work as true callings, not just random coincidences, so he changes plans, and sets out immediately for this new assignment. It's an opportunity to align himself with God's intentions. It becomes a sacramental trip.

And after Paul and his entourage arrive, they seek some quiet spot down by the river to pray and relax. It has, no doubt, been an arduous journey, and won't it be nice to put their feet up and count their blessings? But God has a deeper blessing for them. They make the acquaintance of Lydia, who will become an influential leader of the new Christian outpost in her region. The Spirit fills Paul's mouth with God's own breath, and his preaching of the Gospel is music to her ears. God's blessing is extended to her people, to her friends and neighbors. And may I remind you that God's blessings are not just for our own happiness and fulfillment? We may ask God's blessing on any thing or any activity, but true blessing comes when such things are used for God's purposes, used for the fulfillment of *God's* intentions, used for the intentions expressed by God's own Spirit. Lydia's life of service was not just blessed because she let Paul baptize her, but blessed because of the stamina and commitment she devoted to God's great dream of life and love and freedom.

Your God-sightings, dear Friends, are not just for your own enjoyment, but are a vision and inspiration for your own callings. You are, indeed, blessed to receive them, you are blessed to recognize them; They are signs that your hearts and minds are opening to the possibilities of God's own dream. But more than that, they are callings to align yourselves with God's purposes; the Spirit is calling you to dream along with God, that your lives may be truly blessed, and that the throne of God and the lamb may come to earth. Amen.