

Sermon for Pentecost
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Holy Nativity, Plano
31 May, 2009

In the Jewish calendar, the Passover season continued for eight days: the Feast of Passover, followed by the seven days of unleavened bread. The day after the sabbath that falls in this period is the Feast of Firstfruits, the day when the Jews were to offer to God the first sheaf of barley from the spring harvest. This offering was a thanksgiving for the harvest, and it also served as a pledge that the whole of the harvest would be realized.

Now, remember that St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” This is no mere coincidence. Jesus actually was raised from the dead on the first day of the week after the Passover. The day of Easter is the Feast of Firstfruits. And Jesus’ resurrection is a pledge that the whole of God’s harvest will be brought in to the storehouse.

But today is Pentecost. Pentecost is a Greek word that means fiftieth. It is used to refer to Jewish Feast of Weeks, which comes on the fiftieth day after the Feast of Firstfruits. This is another solemn feast marking the beginning of the summer wheat harvest. It is called the Feast of Weeks, because the fiftieth day is exactly seven weeks after Firstfruits. For those of you who are doing the math, remember that the Hebrew method of counting the days would have included the day from which you start counting. Just as Jesus was in the tomb three days (though we would say two days), there are fifty days between Firstfruits and Pentecost (although we would count 49).

There’s one other thing you need to know about Pentecost, and that is that it was one of the three times of the year when all male Israelites were supposed to present themselves at the temple in Jerusalem for solemn convocation. This regulation was not understood strictly in the first century, because the Jews had scattered all over the known world. But Pentecost was still one of the times when Jews from elsewhere made pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And therein lies the divine strategy.

We read in the Gospel of John this morning that Jesus, after his resurrection, breathed on his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Thus they are given their commission to participate in the work of salvation. This is not to say that all mankind is subject to the whims of Christians. Jesus says this in the context of the gift of the Holy Spirit. With the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, we are

to go to work in God's field, continuing the harvest which began with the firstfruits.

But when Jesus says this, the grain is not yet ripe. The barley has been brought in, but the wheat is still green in the field. And so they wait until Pentecost, when the crops are ready for the harvest. Men from all the Jewish settlements of the world are present, and in the temple, for the Feast of Weeks. And that is when God stages his next campaign.

The disciples in the upper room hear the roaring of the Holy Spirit and see flames settling on each of the others' heads. They realize that this is the power they have been waiting to receive. And they are filled with the inspiration to declare what God has done. The crowd hears the roaring sound and comes together to see what it is. And they find this band of Galileans speaking all of the languages of the Roman empire without accents, so that each of them can understand.

After this, Peter, who slunk away from the High Priest's house 53 days ago, stands up in front of this multitude of thousands and announces the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, crucified in the name of this same multitude. And miraculously, he and the eleven with him are not stoned. Instead, they baptize three thousand more people who hear and believe. And the story of this strange day is carried to the reaches of the Empire, even by those who are not ready to trust in Jesus. The ripe grain is gathered in, and the seed is scattered for the next harvest.

In the image of the harvest, we must always remember that we play two different roles at the same time. We are workers in God's field, bringing in the harvest as God deems it ripe. But we are also the grain being harvested ourselves. We are growing and ripening and producing fruit, or else we are merely chaff to be burned with fire. We do not simply *do* God's work; we *are* God's work as well. And his goal for us is to be able to live comfortably at that intersection of the natural and supernatural, in perfect communion with him, just as we were originally created to live.

We must be God's grain, ripening in the field. We must be God's workers, swinging the scythe whenever and wherever he directs. We must be Christ's body, unified in doing his will, living in the power of the Holy Spirit to make all things whole and to perfectly restore all of creation to its original design. Including us.