

Feast of Pentecost, Yr B Joan M. Testin @ St. Mary Anne's, Northeast MD 31 May, 2009
Readings: Acts 2:1-21 Psalm 104:25-34 Romans 8:22-27 John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

It was just about this time last year,
 I was gathered for worship with my seminary community
 for a special evening service of Vespers.
 The choir had been practicing for weeks;
 the chaplain had worked and re-worked her sermon;
 and the historic font had been scrubbed and re-filled.
Every chair had been brought out of storage
 and had been placed in a large circle around the altar.
This service was the opening event in a week-long celebration and reunion.
 The sanctuary was slowly filling with alumni and students,
 faculty and administration, major donors and the Board of Trustees.

Most of the folks attending were influential, and a fair number were wealthy.
 The stated goal of the week was hospitality.
 The unstated goal was to impress our visitors so that they would
 donate generously to the capital campaign.

All was planned, all had been taken care of,
 every little detail had been scrutinized.
 Even the nasty weather wasn't a major deterrent,
 although the space for dripping umbrellas was at a premium.

Everything was going as planned.
 But nobody had planned on Vincent.
 Vincent lives on Germantown Avenue.
 He carries all of his possessions with him.

He wears several suits of clothes, and is either on drugs or off his medication –
 we can't figure out which.

He attends services on a periodic basis,
 and although we have gotten used to seeing him,
 we are always a little nervous when he is there.

We just never know what he is going to do –
 he does not know how to act.

We hadn't even thought about Vincent when we opened the doors.
 Yet he had heard the chapel bells ring out their invitation
 and decided to come and get out of the rain for awhile.

I was at the main door, greeting the well-dressed visitors,
 handing out programs and candles,
 and encouraging people to sit in the front row.

(Lutherans, like most Episcopalians, avoid the front row like the plague.)
 Suddenly in front of me,
 reaching out his hand for his program and candle, was Vincent.

Because of the rain, he looked – and smelled –
 even more "Vincent-y" than usual.
 He looked me in the eye, as he always does, and said,
 "I've done some things that I need to bring to Jesus."
 To be honest, I really wanted to tell him that
 Jesus was visiting the church down the street that day
 – but of course, I did not.
 As usual, I told him that he was in the right place to do that,
 and gave him his program and candle.
 Before moving into the worship space,
 Vincent carefully laid down his backpack,
 and divested himself of all but his innermost set of clothes.
 And then Vincent, with head held high,
 moved across the sanctuary and sat himself down in the front row –
 directly in front of the altar.
 The choir began the opening chant,
 and everyone began lighting their candles from the large Paschal candle.
 I forgot about Vincent, because the music was beautiful.
 The dots of light throughout the chapel glowed on everyone's faces ...
 bathing the place in a holy beauty.
 And then, in the middle of the anthem,
 Vincent stood up, walked across the room
 and blew out the candles of three women sitting across from him.
 As he went back to his place,
 the women re-lit their candles from those around them.
 Vincent stared at them for a moment.
 Then he stood up again,
 walked to the other side of the room,
 and blew out the candles of two on that side.
 By the time he returned to his seat, their candles were once again ablaze.
 I could see Vincent trying to process this –
 he knew those candles had gone out ... he had made it happen.
 Yet somehow, they were back on.
 His muddled and confused brain could not figure out how this had happened.
 I think he thought it was a miracle.
 So Vincent stood,
 walked to the altar and stood behind it with head bowed.
 Then slowly, he raised his candle high in the air
 and began to dance.
 He was awkward and graceful at the same time.
 The flame from his candle rose and fell with his movements.
 But while that hand held the candle,
 the other clutched at his trousers
 to prevent them from falling around his ankles.

He moved and twirled around the altar as the choir sang
and the candles held by the congregation reflected their
confused faces.

Except for Vincent, lost in his joy,
the chapel was full of frozen, uncomfortable people –
sitting in their damp shoes, with shoulders hunched,
and suddenly-sweaty hands
clutching guilt-edged programs.

Eventually, Vincent's trousers sagged low enough
that it was obvious that all that was under them was Vincent.

It was then that the President of the Seminary moved over to him,
put a gentle arm around his shoulder
and led him towards the back of the chapel.

The anthem ended, we all blew out our candles and the service continued.

But something had changed in the chapel.

Everyone was on edge, and I spent most of the service
trying to understand what I was feeling.

***It is mighty hard to recognize the Spirit of God if
She comes in a package different than the one we expect.***

We heard of a similar experience just a few minutes ago in our reading from Acts.

People were hearing and seeing something unexpected,

And they weren't sure how to react.

We studied this reading in one of my Scripture classes.

My professor told us to look at the second verse that says,

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.*²

She told us to figure out who exactly it is that the passage is talking about;
who it was that was "gathered in one place."

So we looked back at the previous chapter

and read the account of who was gathered together.

The scripture names the eleven apostles (Judas now being out of the picture),

Jesus' brothers, Justus, Matthias, Mary his mother, and certain women.

In the next verse, it says that Peter stands up to address them all –
and that the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty persons.

Now we've all seen the paintings of the apostles

with tongues of fire over their heads.

Yet when we looked at the verses before the Pentecost story,

we realized that there were actually a lot more people there.

This was mildly exciting,

but from the twinkle in the professor's eye,

I could tell there was more.

"Do the math," she urged, "and tell me what you find."

Do the math?

Well, there were the Eleven, Justus and Matthias,

Mary the mother of Jesus,

Jesus' brothers (she told us there were four of them),

and "certain women."

Certain women ... well, good Lord, the passage talks about 17 men,

so what if all the rest were ...

"... Women." She said smugly.

"I've never heard it preached on, but I've done the math.

It sounds like most of those tongues of fire

were hanging over the heads of women."

So this crowd of women and a few men go out into the streets

and begin to prophesy to the crowds that have gathered.

Some who were gathered there were amazed.

But others sneered,

insisting that they were not hearing the Spirit of God.

Their disbelief makes a lot of sense if these preachers were women.

Here were women who were speaking with authority -

- who clearly did not know how to act.

This was a culture where women were not allowed to preach -

nor even to speak much in public.

No wonder Peter reminds the crowd of the words of the prophet Joel.

The crowd needed to be reminded that God had declared that

the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh;

sons and daughters would prophesy.

It is mighty hard to recognize the Spirit of God if

She comes in a package different than the one we expect.

Huge numbers of people were converted that day

because they dared to listen to the voice of the Spirit---

even if that Spirit came through the mouths of women.

So, I find myself wondering about Vincent.

What might have happened in our chapel

if he had not been removed to the back of the room?

He had seen a miracle -

tongues of fire magically re-appearing,

and he had to celebrate it in the only way he could.

Too filled with the glory of God to stay still,

he used his body to celebrate and consecrate that holy space.

Yet we failed to recognize the Holy One in our midst.

We were all sitting there, clutching our little "tongues of fire"

while the one who had it hovering over his head

was taken to the back of the room
 so he wouldn't disturb our carefully-planned service.
 I wonder what would have happened if we'd given him a belt--- and let him dance?

For the people in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit came in a rushing wind.
 And when we say, "Come Holy Spirit,"
 I think this is the kind of experience we imagine.
 Yet perhaps, in a little chapel in Philadelphia,
 the Holy Spirit came in a much different way.
 And we, in the moment, did not recognize her.

***It is mighty hard to recognize the Spirit
 when She comes in a package different than what we expect.***

We know that when the Holy Spirit arrives,
 things will be shaken up,
 and people will be changed.
 She may come through the voices of women in a
 culture or church that does not allow women to preach.
 She may come through the voices of those who speak prophetically
 about racial issues in this country.
 She may come through the person of a man called to be Bishop –
 in a world where some are not yet willing to acknowledge that call.
 And just last year, I think she came through the
 smelly and half-naked body of a man named Vincent,
 who on that day was the only one who recognized
 and celebrated her presence.
 I think She came - because I know that many people were changed that day.
 Most of the conversations that week centered around Vincent –
 around all of the Vincents who
 witness to the miracles of God.
 I don't know how much money was raised for the capital campaign.
 I do know that a lot of people left our chapel that rainy night
 remembering that the voice of God speaks most often
 through those we want most to ignore.
 Come Holy Spirit. Come. And may we recognize you when you arrive.