

Day of Pentecost – Year A - May 31, 2020 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Numbers 11:24-30, Psalm 104:25-35 37, Acts 2:1-21, John 7:37-39

Several years ago, while browsing in a bookstore, I came across a series for young readers. Having nieces and nephews whose love of books I wanted to nurture, I was intrigued. These books were arranged so that the reader had to make choices along the way. The choices influenced the direction and outcome of the story. The story began. When the plot thickened and came to a fork in the road, the reader was offered a choice. If one chose option A they were directed to a certain page and the story continued. If one chose option B, they were directed to a different page and the story continued in an alternative manner. This might happen two or three times during the book. It was, I thought, a creative way to engage the young reader and help them make the story their own.

A wise man, and an author, once said, “story is the way we make sense of the world.” I believe that is true. God has gifted us with several ways to take in data and make decisions. We can receive an explanation which engages our intellect, we can react to words which might engage our emotions, phrases can cause physical feeling which engages our body. Story engages all of these parts of us and more. Story draws on the whole of our being.

Think about the way we describe good stories. Adventures are described as spine tingling, mysteries may cause us to shiver, biography will engage our imagination as we vicariously live the life being described. We are called upon to use our whole being to make sense of the story and thus to make sense of a portion of the world being portrayed.

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost. Pentecost reminds us of the story of how God has been with human beings since the beginning. The historian and Anglican Bishop, N. T. Wright maintains that there is only one story, with many sub-stories or plots. The one story begins with creation and moves down through the centuries to our present day. Wright goes on to say; “The foundation story of Judaism, to which all other stories were subsidiary, was of course the story of the Bible. As the biblical tradition grew and developed, the stories it contained, and the single story which holds them all together grew with it, and the different elements interacted upon one another in a multitude of ways.” Much like the young readers series I discovered in the bookstore years ago, the biblical story has many forks in the road. People arriving at the forks made choices that effected the next chapter of the tale. Abraham could have refused to leave home, Solomon could have sought wealth and power instead of wisdom. Mary could have said no to the angel Gabriel and Paul could have continued to persecute the church. The outcome was never in doubt, the outcome was and is the redemption of the world, the whole world in God’s good time. But God, in God’s wisdom gives us and important part in the creation of the story. We have choice and can alter the way the story moves forward by our decisions. Scholars will tell you that the biblical story is a narrative of salvation history. That’s a scholarly way of saying that there is only one story and we are all a part of that one story in different ways. In Wrights words: “The basic story concerned the creator God and the world, and focused upon Israel’s place as the covenant people...”. The story of the covenant people of God in the midst of the world began with Creation. Then came the patriarchs with Abraham as God’s answer to the fall of Adam. The patriarchs and matriarchs were to be the models of the life God called Israel and eventually all humanity to live. The patriarchs and matriarchs were nomads who had been promised land, the promise of a home filled with abundance. But, before they achieved that promise, there came a fork in the road. Israel fell into slavery in Egypt. After many long years, they were rescued by God in the person of Moses.

Until that time God had seemed to them to be very remote, disinterested, yet God had seen their pain and planned liberation. Moses led the Israelites out of slavery and into the unknown desert to prepare them for a life lived trusting God. Part of that trust was accepting and keeping the Covenant, the 10 commandments given in the desert at Sinai.

Once again, there was a fork in the road. In Canaan, the land promised by God, Israel lived in conflict, with each other, with their neighbors and with God. Finally came the period of the monarchy, chosen by the people against the will of God. But God gave them their desire. But the kings that came after David and Solomon were largely weak and in some cases truly evil. Bishop Wright again: "...the kingdom was divided, the prophets went unheeded..." and the people were defeated by a stronger, worldly power, Babylon. Again, long years of exile from the land was the result of the Israel's disobedience and willfulness. Eventually, God allowed them to return to the land to rebuild the Temple and to rebuild a relationship with God.

And then history repeated itself. The people strayed from the covenant, did not listen to wisdom and were eventually conquered by Rome. And so, we arrive at the point in salvation history when God sends his only Son, Jesus, to be born into the human family. Jesus came to teach and heal to offer one path in what was yet again a fork in the road, a choice of direction. The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension brings us to the place in the story where promise and covenant take on new meaning and new direction, still part of the same overarching story. On that Pentecost centuries ago, the disciples in the upper room had been promised an Advocate, but they had not yet received what had been promised. They were expecting the festival of Pentecost to be much like all those which had gone before in their lifetimes. Only half aware of what had happened and what it would mean for them in the future, they were unaware of the major turn in plot of God's story which awaited them.

Pentecost which we celebrate today, was first of all, a Jewish festival observed each year in the spring. It marked the giving of the Covenant to Moses so many centuries ago. For the faithful it was an annual reminder of how God had called them to live and how they were not able to do so. Pentecost was also a festival of thanksgiving, a recognition that God had created all that was and that a portion was to be given back.

On this particular Pentecost, in a year between 30 and 33 CE something different happened to a small group of followers of Jesus. In the manner of a good story, the plot thickens, something unlooked for comes onto the horizon. Instead of prayers and offerings in the Temple, on that holy day, a small group were gathered in an upper room. It was most probably the same upper room where they had eaten a last meal with Jesus, where he had appeared to them, and to Thomas after the Resurrection. It was the same upper room where they had been told to wait for the promised power, the pledged Advocate who was to be with them always.

On that Pentecost, in the upper room in Jerusalem, the festival of Pentecost changed dramatically. It still called to mind a covenant and a promise. The promise of land and the covenant of Moses had always been a part of this celebration. But now, "...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." This was not merely another fork in the road, another chance to make sense of the world, this was a new direction, a new moment within the original story.

Jesus had said that the disciples were to wait for the Spirit and then they would be sent out to the witnesses to what had happened, witnesses to Jerusalem, to Samaria and to the ends of

the earth. They had waited in expectation and their waiting had been rewarded. They had been promised the Spirit and with tongues of fire and a mighty wind, with unknown tongues, they had received the Spirit.

There was also the covenant, the original covenant of Sinai was to continue, but those who followed Jesus received another covenant as well. This covenant has come down to us today as the Baptismal Covenant which we recommit to with each new person who is baptized. The Holy Spirit and the Baptismal Covenant offered to those few in the upper room in Jerusalem a lifechanging event in the plot of their story. No longer were they anxious about the future, frightened of the authorities or feeling lost. They had chosen the path they would follow. They had become believers. In becoming believers and in sharing their witness through the power of the Holy Spirit, they bequeathed to us their heritage. What we celebrate and give thanks for on this Pentecost is that promise fulfilled and covenant committed.

In a little while we will have an opportunity to state again what we believe in the words of the Baptismal Covenant. "Do you believe?" is the question asked, as people respond "I believe."

Like the Covenant given Moses, this statement of what we believe is also a statement of how we will live with God. How we will live with God is transformed into what we do, how we act. In an unending spiral we acknowledge what we believe which leads us to act in accordance with what we believe. Our actions then lead us full circle back to what we believe, at a deeper and more heartfelt level. In turn, this new spiritual level of belief leads us to act more deeply in conformity to what we believe, which again comes full circle to deeper belief. I believe and I act in accord with what I believe became the way of life for those disciples as they set out to witness in Jerusalem, Samaria and the ends of the earth. It becomes the way of life for us too, who have been touched by tongues of fire and a mighty wind of the Holy Spirit, as we were all touched at our own baptism.