May 19/20 2018 Rev. Amy Haines

Acts 2:1-21 The Power of 50 Pentecost/Graduation

The older I get, the faster 50 days fly by. The older my children get, the easier it is to spend $50 eating out. And 50 years old used to sound so old, until Ken passed that milestone and I creep ever closer to it.

In elementary school, they celebrate 50 days x2, the 100th day of school. I can remember celebrating my mother’s 50th birthday with a surprise party. And this year, our denomination is celebrating its 50th birthday, having been formed in April 1968 from a merger of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren.

How many 50th anniversary parties have you attended? How many of you have been blessed to attend a 50th class reunion? How many of you were grateful to celebrate a 50th birthday?

50 is a number that captures our attention. 50 is a number that can be celebrated as a major milestone. 50 is a number that can move us to look back and give thanks as well as look ahead and hope for a better tomorrow.

We are not the first to see significance in the number 50. Our Hebrew ancestors set the Festival of Pentecost, also known as the Festival of Weeks, 50 days after the Festival of Passover, for they believed it took Moses and the Israelites 50 days to travel from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, 50 days of leaving the past behind in order to receive new guidance from God in the form of the 10 Commandments. So the Festival of Pentecost celebrates God’s Word as well as the first fruits of the harvest. Whereas Passover recalled sacrifice, Pentecost celebrated blessing.

On that first Pentecost following Jesus’ death and resurrection, I wonder, however, if the disciples of Jesus were ready for a festival of blessing. Imagine all that they had seen, heard and experienced in the past 50 days.

At Passover, the previous festival day in Jerusalem, Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, beaten, crucified and buried. Then three days later he appeared before them, alive, resurrected from the dead! Jesus remained among the disciples for 40 days, teaching them about the kingdom of God and empowering them to continue his ministry. But Jesus could not remain in their physical presence forever. So ten days prior to Pentecost, the disciples watched Jesus ascend into heaven.

Now, as preparations for Pentecost were underway in Jerusalem, as Jews and God-fearers gathered at the Temple from throughout the known world, the disciples were still gathered together in one place, praying, sharing stories of Jesus, breaking bread, and waiting expectantly for the coming of the Holy Spirit. They numbered about 120, including men and women. They had elected Matthias as the 12th apostle, to take the place of Judas. They prayed, and waited, and wondered what might happen at this Festival.

In 50 days their lives had been turned upside down, then righted, and now were about to be turned upside down once again. Jesus had promised them the Holy Spirit as a gift of his abiding presence with them, someone to guide them and remind them of all that Jesus had taught them.

Realistically, however, I believe that as much as the disciples eagerly waited for the Holy Spirit,

they really had no idea what they were waiting for. Think about it—if you were Peter or John, would you have any clear idea of how the Holy Spirit would enter your life? If you were practical Thomas, even in your wildest imaginations would you be able to envision what was about to occur?

They prayed and prepared and trusted Jesus’ Word, waiting around expectantly for a sign from God concerning what to do next, even if they had no clue what that sign would be.

That sign from God came in an unpredictable and powerful way, as the Holy Spirit showed up with a mighty wind, tongues of flame, and diversity of languages that made everyone in Jerusalem sit up and take notice of this ragtag group of men and women, rural fishermen and former tax collectors.

“Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, [individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them] and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.” (The Message v2-4 with CEB v3)

They burst forth from behind closed doors to boldly proclaim God’s mighty deeds of power in languages they had never studied or spoken before. They were rural Galileans, ordinary men and women who were not known as world travelers. Yet through the mighty power of God’s Spirit, suddenly Jews from all over the known world were hearing God praised in their native tongues.

No wonder the Scriptures describe all who heard such a commotion as amazed, astonished, perplexed, surprised, bewildered, and thunderstruck! Nowadays such a scene would go viral in less than a day, with many more wondering how such a feat would be possible.

It was possible only due to the Holy Spirit of God moving in and through and among them.

Then the Holy Spirit came mightily upon Peter. Bold, brash Peter, who once denied ever knowing Jesus, now boldly stood up to share with any and all who would listen what was really happening that day. This morning we hear only a glimpse of Peter’s full sermon, as he began to tell the story of Jesus by proclaiming that what was seen and heard that morning was the fulfillment of the prophet Joel.

“In the Last Days,” God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams.

When the time comes, I’ll pour out my Spirit on those who serve me, men and women both, and they’ll prophesy.” (v17-18 The Message)

Peter then went on to proclaim that they were followers of Jesus, Jesus who was crucified by the religious leaders yet risen from the dead by God Almighty. Peter gave what I would call the first altar call, and 3000 came to believe in Jesus, claiming salvation through the forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ.

Can you imagine 3000 people being added to a church of 120 in one day? That number always blows my mind, for it was the combined census numbers of two of the towns I have served in, Payne and Deshler. One had a population of 1,000, the other of 2,000. It is hard for me to imagine 3000 people coming to faith in one day, in the midst of the Jewish festival. Talk about a Holy Spirit movement!

Yet on that day of Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, everything changed.

Disciples who 50 days prior fled for their lives, disciples who 50 days prior cowered in fear behind locked doors, were suddenly and boldly out and about among the people, proclaiming the good news of God and God’s Son Jesus. They were transformed, and would never be the same again. Jews who shared a common faith yet not a common language all heard the same good news of Jesus, and many came to believe. They then would return home, across the Roman Empire to share what they had seen and heard. Already Acts 1:8 was becoming a reality,

as witnesses to Jesus spread across Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The first apostles had to trust the Spirit to go with these new followers, as they could no longer contain the message of Jesus to their small group in Jerusalem.

On that day of Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, everything changed.

50 days prior, I am sure the disciples would never have imagined that Jesus would rise from the dead, yet be present with them through the Holy Spirit. 50 days prior, I am sure the disciples would never have imagined that from their humble words a new movement would be unleashed upon the world. 50 hours prior, I am sure the disciples would never have imagined

the Holy Spirit to be that powerful, that unpredictable, that purposeful. And if they tried to look 50 days into the future, I am sure they had no idea where the Spirit would take them next.

If you have ever celebrated a 50th milestone, whether wedding anniversary, class reunion,

or the final 50 days of school, is your current reality anywhere near where you expected to be

50 years or even 50 days ago? If you’ve been married 50 years, are you working, living or enjoying retirement anywhere near where you expected to be?

If you’ve celebrated that 50th birthday, have you accomplished anything you sought to accomplish by 50, or can you look back and celebrate different accomplishments that were not expected?

Seniors, have these last 50 days of school gone by too fast, celebrating all those final moments?

50 months ago, our high school seniors would have been in the second semester of their 7th grade year, like my son Nathan is now. How many of them knew then what they wanted to do with their lives, let alone what they wanted to participate in in high school?

50 months ago, I was just announcing to my churches that I had been appointed to be the Assistant to the District Superintendent for Northwest Plains District. I had honestly given up hope of ever moving south of 30, and now look where I am, close to home.

When we look back over 50 years, 50 months, or 50 days, may we celebrate our journeys and accomplishments, the ways we have survived and the ways we have thrived, and hopefully our growth in following and trusting Jesus.

When we look back over 50 years, 50 months, or 50 days, may we not regret what we haven’t accomplished, who we haven’t cared for, and the ways we have ignored God’s Spirit in our lives.

..Author and Speaker Tony Campolo wrote, “I read a sociological study … where fifty people over the age of ninety-five were asked one question: ‘If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently? … Three answers constantly re-emerged and dominated the results of the study … 1. If I had it to do over again, I would reflect more … 2. If I had it to do over again, I would risk more … 3. If I had it to do over again, I would do more things that would live on after I am dead.”

One woman named Nadine Stair put it like this: “If I had my life to live over again, I’d try to make more mistakes next time. I would relax. I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been this trip. I know of very few things I would take seriously. I would be crazier. I would be less hygienic. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers, and watch more sunsets. I would burn more gasoline. I would eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I would have more actual problems and fewer imaginary ones.

“You see, I am one of those people who live [prophylactically and] sensibly and sanely. Hour after hour. Day by day. Oh, I have had my moments, and if I had it to do over again, I’d have more of them. In fact, I’d have nothing else. Just moments, one right after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day. I have been one of those people who never go anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do over again, I would go places and do things and travel lighter than I have. If I had my life to live over, I would start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall.” -taken from Who Switched the Price Tags, A Search for Values in a Mixed-Up World (1986),

 -Robert Kopp “Letting the Pentecostal Winds Blow” preaching.com, adapted

We are called to not simply look back in regret or celebration. We are also called to look ahead.

When we look ahead 50 years, 50 months, or 50 days, what do you look forward to? And how do you approach the future-with fear and anxiety or anticipation and hope?

Yes, I know some of you will not be living in 50 years, and thus look forward to eternity in heaven. To those who are graduating from high school or college, 50 months may appear to be a long time of uncertainty and growth. And in our ever changing world, 50 days may be life changing.

50 days was life changing for the first disciples of Jesus. From Passover to Pentecost,

from Pentecost to an unknown future.

The disciples had no idea what God had in store for them next. They had no idea that many of them would suffer and die proclaiming the good news of Jesus. Yet they trusted that no matter what they faced, God was with them. The Holy Spirit would guide them. And they had good news of a Savior that must be shared with the world.

I do not own a crystal ball. I cannot tell you what the next 50 days will bring, let along the next 50 weeks or 50 months or 50 years. This is true for us as individuals, for us as a congregation,

and for us as the United Methodist Church.

What I can tell you, with conviction and confidence, is that we are not alone on our journeys of life and of faith. When we believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit will also be present with us, no matter what we face. No matter what changes happen in our lives, in our church, or in our denomination, God is still God. And God is still present with us.

The power of Pentecost, the power of God’s mighty Holy Spirit, is a power still alive and available to us here today.

While we only celebrate the wonder of that first Pentecost once a year, the fact is that Pentecost has occurred in many places and in many ways throughout our history. And Pentecost can and does still happen in our world and in our lives here and now.

Where have you seen and heard and experienced the Holy Spirit transforming lives and congregations? Where have you seen and heard and experienced the Holy Spirit unleashing new life upon God’s people in this world? When have you experienced Pentecost?

Just this week, West Ohio has a group of pastors riding motorcycles in the hills of Vietnam,

preaching and sharing at UM house churches then gifting their pastors one of the new bikes.

Access to the church in communist Vietnam is definitely a movement of the Holy Spirit.

Just this weekend, the United Methodist Women’s Assembly was held in Columbus, with a theme “The Power of Bold” as they celebrated 150 years of ministry. The women gathered from around the globe to worship and celebrate, to advocate and serve.

When Gaston Ntambo was given his first pair of shoes by a missionary when he was nine years old and his preacher dad was making $1 per week, only through the leading of the Holy Spirit has he been able to become an aviation missionary in his own country with Wings of the Morning. He and his wife tirelessly sacrifice their time and energy to follow where the Spirit leads. When he began as a pilot, never would he have imagined the new plane we helped to purchase several years ago, that can bring critical medical help to more people more effectively.

When you as a congregation started working with Interfaith Hospitality Network twenty years ago, would you have ever imagined how many years you would continue to love on our neighbors, and how doing so would change your lives?

I have seen the Holy Spirit transform lives around the world and locally. I have seen the Holy Spirit give hope to the hopeless, guidance to the struggling, comfort to the grieving, boldness to the shy.

You and I don’t need to go halfway around the world, nor halfway across the county, nor have a large audience to follow where the Spirit leads.

Maybe the Spirit guides you to share with youth the love of Jesus. Maybe the Spirit guides you to keep a watchful eye on your elderly neighbor. Maybe the Spirit guides you to begin a prayer group at lunch at your workplace. Maybe the Spirit guides you to work in prison ministry or adult new readers or with Vacation Bible School.

We just have to be open to the Spirit, God’s presence in our lives, no matter where that Spirit guides us. And that is the hard part. The Spirit might move us beyond our comfort zones. The Spirit might transform our worship songs and outreach. The Spirit may change our understanding of what it means to be the church. The Spirit may call us to embrace as brothers and sisters in Christ those who look differently and speak differently and think differently and act differently.

..As James Jones once wrote, “Those same Holy Spirit winds of change are blowing today. The question is not whether the church will be renewed. Of course it will be; the Spirit is at work.

The only question is whether you and I will prove a hindrance or a channel to God’s activity.”

 -Robert Kopp “Letting the Pentecostal Winds Blow” preaching.com

Over the next 50 days, as we move into the season of Pentecost, I invite you to be open to the Holy Spirit’s presence.

May we learn to be channels of the Spirit, living in ways that show how Jesus makes a difference in our lives. May we learn to be channels of the Spirit, trusting where the Spirit seeks to take us on our journeys of faith. May we learn to be channels of the Spirit, open to God’s presence with us as we worship and as we serve. May we be channels of the Spirit for the next 50 days, the next 50 months, the next 50 years.

..Rick Kirchoff once said, “When God sends forth the Spirit amazing things happen:

barriers are broken, communities are formed, opposites are reconciled, unity is established,

disease is cured, addiction is broken, cities are renewed, races are reconciled, hope is established, people are blessed, and church happens.

Today the Spirit of God is present and we’re gonna’ have church. So be ready, get ready. . . God is up to something. . . discouraged folks cheer up, dishonest folks ‘fess up, sour folks sweeten up, closed folk, open up, gossipers shut up, conflicted folks make up, sleeping folks wake up, lukewarm folk, fire up, dry bones shake up, and pew potatoes stand up! But most of all, Christ the Savior of all the world is lifted up.”

--Rodney Buchanan 6-03 sermoncentral.com

The power of Pentecost is not over! The good news of Jesus is still good news for our world today! Wherever life takes you over the next 50 days, let alone the next 50 months, go in the power of the Spirit, as a beloved child of God, to proclaim in word and deed the good news of a crucified and risen Savior and Lord.

May it be so. Let us pray.