

TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE

TEXT: Acts 2:1-4, 38-47

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on June 5, 2022

Later in the service we'll celebrate Holy Communion. In the part of the liturgy we call The Great Thanksgiving, I pray the words, "By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death and made with us a new covenant by water and the spirit." That one sentence summarizes the meaning that the Christian church assigns to Jesus' life from Holy Week through today, which is the festival of Pentecost and the last Sunday of the Easter season. I'm going to come back to that, but I want to lay out some background first.

Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which occurs 50 days after Passover, which itself marked the flight of the enslaved Hebrews out of Egypt. Passover is the beginning of what is broadly described as the Exodus, described in the book of the Bible by that name. After 40 years in the wilderness, Moses guided them to the land of Canaan; the "Promised Land" described as a land flowing with milk and honey; the land of their Hebrew ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Just as Passover marked the beginning of the Exodus, Shavuot, or Pentecost, marked the end—the festival of abundant harvest in the Promised Land. Entry into that Promised Land was dependent on the Hebrews being willing to continue as God's people, a relationship that was consecrated with the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai during their wilderness sojourn. So, the festival of Shavuot has several layers. It celebrates the plenty of the harvest; but it does so by bringing the first fruits of that harvest as an offering to God, out of gratitude for giving the Law, which allowed them to accept a relationship with God, which then allowed them to inhabit that land of milk and honey.

The oldest celebrations of Shavuot focused on the harvest part, because it was necessary to keep the religious structures going. The "first fruits" refer to the first and best of your crops and livestock. The law stipulated that you had to bring your first fruits to the Tabernacle and later the Temple, because that was how the priests and Levites who ran the place got paid. It's the foundation of the Christian practice of tithing, giving 10% of our income to the work of God.

Since those keeping worship alive in the community had no time to do other work, everybody brought the first of their crops and the first born of their livestock to the Temple, so that the Temple workers and their families could eat. And the Temple workers, in turn, offered 10% of what was brought to them to God by burning it on the altar. So that everyone participated in the giving and receiving cycle.

Since physical gifts were required, Shavuot was one of three festivals that required every Jewish male to physically show up in Jerusalem, a "pilgrim" festival as they were known. Passover was the first, Shavuot/Pentecost, was the second at the start of the harvest and then Sukkot, marking the end of the harvest, was the third.

After the return of Israel from the Babylonian Exile in the 4th century BCE, the synagogue and rabbinic movement began to take hold and the connection of Shavuot to the giving of the Torah at Sinai showed up in ancient Hebrew writing more frequently. After the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 CE it became the main focus of the festival.

Shavuot, or Pentecost in Greek, is the reason all of Jesus' disciples are in Jerusalem 50 days after Easter, which is timed to coincide with Passover. It's also why there was such a huge gathering of other Jews from around the known world. They had to be. It was required that every Jew physically show up at the Temple for the festival, whether they lived in Jerusalem, Galilee, or Rome. At the time of this story there still are no Christians, as we would know them. There aren't even Gentile converts yet. This is still a 100% Jewish story, concerning claims by Jewish disciples that their master, a Jewish rabbi named Jesus, had risen from the dead.

The other reason the Jewish festival context matters is that the symbolism of rushing wind and tongues of flame is a deliberate echo of the event at the heart of the Pentecost celebration—the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Listen to Exodus 19:16-19:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now all of Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.

Also remember that, since leaving Egypt, the Israelites had been led by God in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. As they get to Sinai, cloud and fire surround the mountain and you've got quite the pyrotechnic display, not to mention lots of noise. Further, the ancient Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria, who was alive for Jesus' entire lifetime and some twenty years beyond, wrote commentary suggesting that the fire on Mt. Sinai was not just fun special effects but rather the means by which the language of God was translated into speech that the people could understand.

Here is how Philo described God speaking at Sinai in his work, *On the Decalogue*: "Then from the midst of the fire that streamed from heaven there sounded forth to their utter amazement a voice, for the flame became articulate speech in the language familiar to the audience, and so clearly and distinctly were the words formed by it that they seemed to see rather than hear them." Since Philo lived for an additional 20 years after Jesus' death, it's hard to know whether he wrote that description of Sinai before or after the Shavuot festival described in Acts 2. But as a faithful Jewish male, it seems all but certain that he was in Jerusalem on that day. Egyptians are specifically mentioned as being present.

And the last interesting thing about Philo here is that, even though he was a Jewish philosopher, Jews largely ignored him. It was the Christians who latched onto Philo in the early centuries of the church. Was Philo not only in Jerusalem, but there in the crowd of Jews who heard Peter speak? Did Philo's description of Sinai have a direct connection to the way the coming of the Holy Spirit was described in Acts 2? I could run down that rabbit hole all day.

But the point is that all aspects of this event in Acts 2 are intentionally connected to the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 20. For Jews, the giving of the Torah was the completion of their liberation from slavery. Passover marked their physical liberation and giving of the Torah marked their spiritual liberation. Passover was about what they were freed FROM, the Torah is what they were freed FOR. It was the covenant, the marriage contract between God and God's people.

Remember that covenant is one of the earliest kind of agreements in human history and is the way that the responsibilities of kinship are extended beyond the biological family. The earliest known covenant is marriage, when isolated tribes of related individuals first expanded enough to meet a different tribe and consider intermarriage. Is this new person marrying into our tribe to be treated like anyone else in our family? The covenant of marriage, accompanied by some kind of physical identifier—like we have rings today—was the outward sign of the covenant promise that a new person who was not biologically related was now family and had all the rights, responsibilities, and protection afforded to everyone else. By virtue of the covenant, they were kin.

The covenant at Sinai was the culmination of Israel's liberation, which was begun at Passover. It's only after Sinai that worship is formally established in the community. With the Torah to guide their life together, the tabernacle is constructed, more detailed laws are established, a system for religious leadership is set up. God and Israel were married at Sinai and with the security provided by that covenant relationship, they were free to set up a household.

The day of Pentecost in Acts 2 is a kind of renewal of those marriage vows made at Sinai and completes the establishment of the “new covenant” that Jesus began at his last meal with the Disciples 50 days before. Remembering that Luke and Acts are two parts of the same work, written by the same author, Jesus says in Luke 22 that the disciples are gathered to celebrate Passover. While it’s problematic to suggest the Last Supper was the actual Passover meal—as it should have been Friday, not Thursday—what Luke wants us to understand is that what Jesus says and does at that meal is symbolically connected to Passover. When the supper is over, in verse 20 of Luke 22, Jesus says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

By “new” there, Jesus doesn’t mean a replacement. God’s covenant relationships never get replaced; but they do get updates and expansions and slightly different versions for different times and peoples. It’s the same software but for different platforms. Passover, itself was not a covenant. It was the first and necessary step for liberating the Hebrews from their bondage in Egypt—a process that would be completed with the giving of the Torah at Sinai. It’s that whole-bodied freedom—body, mind, and spirit—made possible by God and through Moses that joins a people to their God in joy, marked by the covenant at the mountain with the keeping of the Sabbath as the sign of that covenant relationship.

So the “new covenant” Jesus is referencing at the final meal in Luke 22 is only established by the giving of the Holy Spirit that Luke describes in Acts 2. Paul repeatedly references the church as the Bride of Christ, and Pentecost is the wedding covenant that establishes the relationship between Jesus and his followers, just like Sinai was the wedding covenant between God and Israel more broadly.

Passover began the physical liberation of Israel that was completed with spiritual liberation at Sinai. Luke, as he tries to explain the story of Jesus to his friend Theophilus in the two books of Luke and Acts, is explicit in his symbols to tie the work of Jesus into the broader work of Jewish liberation. What God did through Moses then, God has done anew through Jesus now. And all that has come down to us in The Great Thanksgiving in our communion liturgy when the person presiding prays, “By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death and made with us a new covenant by water and the spirit.”

Well, so what? Lots of interesting connections, but how does any of it make a difference in the here and now? For starters, as antisemitism is on the rise both here and around the world, we Christians need to reckon with the terrible role Christians have played in that, both knowingly and unknowingly. And one of those ways is to keep insisting that Jesus came to replace Judaism with a new religion. Christians ignore the “Old” Testament saying that it was somehow replaced by the “New” and is no longer relevant. There are deep and wide conspiracy theories insisting that Jesus wasn’t even Jewish, all of which is rubbish.

So, one thing we can take away in our age is the fact that the Christian New Testament simply cannot be properly understood without the Hebrew Scriptures that preceded it. “New” doesn’t mean a replacement; it is simply a collection of Jewish writings that came later in time. A “new” baby doesn’t replace older children; a new baby expands a family. And it is impossible to understand the unfolding life of that new baby apart from the life of the family who birthed and raised it. Without the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish faith, there is no New Testament, no Jesus, no Christianity. Period.

On the spiritual front, the spirit that fell on those gathered for Shavuot in Jerusalem in Acts 2 is the exact same spirit of the exact same God that shook Mt. Sinai with fire and smoke. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of the only God there is, and those who have it understand each other, no matter what language they speak, no matter their country of origin, no matter their skin color, no matter their gender, no matter who or how they love, no matter their age, intellect, ability, or even their religion.

The Holy Spirit is the love of God that fills those who gather together in gratitude for an abundant harvest, for a God who wants not blind obedience but relationship within the safe boundaries of respect for all living things. The Holy Spirit falls on those who agree together to drink the cup that Jesus drank; the purifying fire of suffering for the greater good, which produces the courage to embrace death in service to everlasting life. And

if it's not that sort of courage that we need in our current moment here in 2022; I don't know what else to suggest.

Come, Holy Spirit. Come wind, come fire, come the tongues of every nation on earth to speak the name of our Maker and Redeemer, each in our own language, yet filled with but a single Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.