

The Festival of Pentecost • May 10-11, 2008
St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA
Acts 2:1-21

"50+ Days Ablaze!"

Pastor Jack Meehan

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, come with wind and fire. Come, Holy Spirit, blow powerfully into our lives and breathe new life into your people. Come, Holy Spirit, burn away all the impurities and imperfections in us that mar and deface the image of God. Come, Holy Spirit, renew in us the grace first given in Holy Baptism, and with hearts ablaze set us on the path of service and discipleship. Come, Holy Spirit, and fill us with your presence and power; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today is the fiftieth and final day of Easter, a day called Pentecost. The very name speaks of "five," as in Pentagon. Pentecost is sometimes called the forgotten festival of the Church. Together with Christmas and Easter, it is one of the three great festivals which celebrate the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christmas celebrates the gift of God the Father in giving his only begotten Son, Jesus, born of Mary. Easter celebrates the resurrection of God the Son, who rose in triumph over sin, death, and the grave. Both Christmas and Easter have strong customs and traditions that go with them, and to a great degree have been commercialized as we all know. It's different with Pentecost, though. What are the customs and traditions that go with this festival? Not many, if any at all. Do you have a special Pentecost dinner for family and friends? Probably not. Are the stores flooded with Pentecost cards that we send out? Not the last time I checked. And yet, despite the absence of all these things, this day is so incredibly vital to our faith. Without Pentecost, without the Spirit, we would not know Jesus or his saving work. Today, on this Festival of Pentecost as we close out our Easter journey through 50 Days Ablaze!, we look ahead to the continuing journey of faith before us under the theme "50+ Days Ablaze!" May the Spirit's power rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of God's Word, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Over the last fifty days, we have been on a journey called 50 Days Ablaze! This has coincided with the great fifty days of Easter, and week by week, we have focused our attention upon the seven mission responses: Learn, Pray, Give, Tell, Send, Go, and Celebrate. Through individual devotion and prayer using the devotional book (good stuff!), small group Bible study and discussion in the huddles, preaching and teaching here at church, a congregation-wide prayer vigil, servant event and mission fair, and prayer walks the Holy Spirit has been at work among us, no doubt about it. What the fruit from all of this will be remains to be seen, but I will say that I am already seeing signs of that fruit. We have used the term "journey" for what we've been going through together during 50 Days Ablaze! Now, as we conclude this and look ahead, I think a different term is needed for what's next. What we've been on is a journey. What we're embarking on is an adventure. The difference is that a journey ends with a destination point that you're expecting. Our journey through 50 Days Ablaze! has led us to this destination point on Pentecost Sunday. On the other hand, an adventure is much more open-ended. We really don't know where we're headed. There may be side-trips along the way, unexpected delays, encountering people and places we would never have imagined. It is the great adventure of faith as we are led forth in life by the power of the Holy Spirit, not always knowing where we're headed or what's around the bend, but confidently trusting that the Spirit will lead us where he

would have us be, giving us what is needed at every point along the way. This is 50+ Days Ablaze! Are you ready for this adventure?

Perhaps the lack of customs and traditions with the Festival of Pentecost are due to our uncertainty about who the Holy Spirit is and what he does. Christmas and Easter are much more concrete: the birth of a baby, and a dead man - the God Man - coming back to life. But the Spirit is not so concrete. Our experience of the Holy Spirit is like wearing eyeglasses. The only time we really look at them is when we're looking for them. Glasses are not supposed to be seen as much as they're supposed to be seen through. They are functioning best when we don't even notice them. We may take them off to clean them, wiping off smudges and smears, but when they're sitting on our nose, we probably aren't even aware of them. Their best work is done when, through them, we can see the movie we're watching or the book we're reading. We don't see our glasses when we wear them, but when we wear them, we see! The Holy Spirit helps us to see, not just with our eyes, but with our heart, our mind, and our spirit. We aren't going to see the Spirit, but we can see and feel the effects of the Spirit at work in our lives: "calling us, keeping us in the one true faith," as Luther puts it in his explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed. In both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, the word for Spirit means breath, wind, or air. We don't see the wind, but we see what it does. It shakes the dead wood out of trees. It cools on a hot, humid day. It can also blow things apart, as we saw this past week in nearby Stafford. So also with the Spirit. We have no more control over the Spirit than we have over the wind. The wind of the Spirit can indeed shake us out of our comfortable complacency. The fire and power of the Spirit can indeed reignite our faith when it is only dull embers, setting it ablaze with rekindled passion and zeal. The energy of the Spirit can indeed lead us in new directions that we would never have pursued on our own. This is 50+ Days Ablaze! - the adventure of faith to which the Spirit calls us. Our upcoming Town Hall meetings will be opportunities for us to learn more about the adventure of faith to which the Spirit is calling our congregation.

"No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3b). This is Paul's summary of the Spirit - brief and to the point. It is the Holy Spirit who works in us through God's Word, the Scriptures, and through the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper to say "Jesus is Lord." It is the Holy Spirit who continually encourages, prompts, supports, convicts and prods us to call on the saving name of Jesus who died for us that we might live, and by his cleansing blood has purchased us for his own. If all of this 50+ Days Ablaze! adventure scares you, sounds too risky, unsettling or uncomfortable, each one of us always has the option to walk away. But know this, we can't control the Spirit! We can run, but we can't hide, anymore than those first disciples in today's Gospel (John 20:19-23) could hide from Jesus behind closed doors. The Holy Spirit is loose in the world! That's the kind of God we have: a passionate God whose heart is ablaze with burning love for all people, who sacrificed the life of his only Son, and who will stop at nothing to draw all people to himself. The journey of 50 Days Ablaze! has ended. Let the adventure of 50+ Days Ablaze! now begin as the Spirit leads us forward. May God make it so for Jesus' sake. Amen.