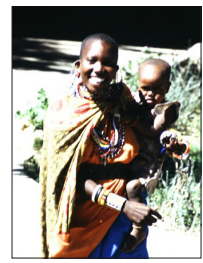


The Third Face of God

Rev. David P. Baak

Acts 2:1-21



Pentecost

May 15, 2016

In Preparation for Worship

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,...tongues, as of fire,...God declares,...I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh....

Acts 2, Selected

Opening Sentences of Scripture

Hear these words of Jesus to his disciples, and to us, recorded in John 14:

14:15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you....26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Let us worship God on this Pentecost day as we remember and celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

* * *

I want to start this morning with the flyer in your bulletins. The top picture is of a fresco in a small chapel in a village in southern Germany, from about the year 1400. Most likely, the picture represents the Trinity. Three figures—an older man, a younger man, and a woman between them—three separate persons. But the figures are also joined together below the waist and there is only one set of arms. The inscription on the fresco reads: "Abraham sees three; he worships one."

The fresco reflects our ancient theology from the Nicene Creed, which dates all the way back to the fourth century: "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,...We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father.... We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son."

The inscription is a reference to the story in Genesis 18 where we read: "The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent....He looked up and saw three men standing near him.... " (Gen 18:1-2a). The story tells us that Abraham ran out to meet them and invited them in to rest and to have a meal.

The lower picture is a Russian icon, also from about 1400, with three people at table, an oak tree in the background, and other characters standing by. There are many artistic variations of this story that is called the "Hospitality of Abraham," and they depict what has traditionally been called the "Old Testament Trinity."

There is also a very strong history of seeing the Holy Spirit as feminine, and there are a number of depictions of the Spirit as a woman. God, three in One: Father, Son, Mother.

That understanding is still strong in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. We, in the Western Catholic and Protestant traditions, lost much of that, at least partly because the King James Version of the Bible, first published 400 years ago, translated *pneuma* from the Greek as "ghost" rather than "spirit" – as a neuter word, as an "it," rather than as a feminine word, or a person, and that image has dominated and been reinforced ever since in our strongly patriarchal culture.

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But beyond these details and possible interpretations, the most important point of these pictures—and the tradition—is the teaching that the Holy Spirit is a person. The Spirit is not an “it” but a full, stand-alone, personal expression of God.

And yet, we also have the story from Acts 2 that Jeremy read. The day of Pentecost, according to tradition, occurs fifty days after Easter and ten days after the Ascension, when Jesus gave his disciples the commission to go out into all the world; when he promised that he would always be with them; and, then, he disappeared from them, as the scripture says, by ascending to heaven out of their sight.

Given all that, try to imagine what that Pentecost must have been like. Here are the disciples, all together in one place—sitting in a house—still wondering what the stories of resurrection and ascension and commission mean; wondering what to do; afraid of what the authorities will do next, especially with all these stories and rumors stirring things up.

Then, suddenly, a noise of violent wind—for us in this part of the world we have an image in our minds of a tornado; the sound of a freight train. During three days this past week, the news and weather reports had graphic pictures of dozens of tornados, one of them a mile wide, the sound absolutely deafening—we don’t have to imagine what the “sound of a violent wind” was like. And flames over each person’s head – just try to imagine that—what did that mean? And all of the excited talking in dozens of languages started.

It’s amazing that anyone could understand anyone in any language, whatever they spoke or heard— “and, they were filled with the Holy Spirit” we are told. And with the crowd we ask: “What does this mean?”

This short passage—only thirteen verses—is the only place in all the scripture to tell this story, and Luke only uses it as an introduction to Peter’s sermon, which Jeremy also read. We don’t know the mystery of Pentecost any more than we know the rest of the mysteries of Christmas, or Good Friday, or Easter.

What we do know is that something very distinctive happened here and people changed their behavior from passive, and fearful, hidden in a house, to being very assertive and active and in the streets. They changed from a house-full of timid disciples in the morning to a movement that numbered more than three thousand energized people by the end of the day.

So Pentecost is not simply the last day of the Easter season; Pentecost is the very real beginning of a dynamic new life for all of us. In a very real sense, Pentecost is the presentation of the third face of God— a third expression of God— as powerfully as God is shown in the Creation and in the Incarnation.

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We understand God as Creator. Just as the fresco depicts, we have an image in our mind of an old man, and the image does not depend on anything else. The same is true for God the Son, the Christ, the Redeemer. Incarnation most often means for us that God shows us a human face at Christmas and on Good Friday. We may not understand all the theology, but in our minds we see Jesus as a person.

Not so much with the Holy Spirit. We say “Come Holy Spirit” and we use words that name the Spirit as a personal being—but, contrary to the tradition—our image is something else: “spirit,” “presence,” “ghost.” We use wind, fire, or language from this isolated story to explain the Spirit rather than thinking, believing, and acting that the Holy Spirit, too, stands on her own, a full expression of God. That’s the value of this fresco, for me...it gives me a picture, an image of the theology we confess.

But the Holy Spirit also is Community—that is part of the mystery. If you do a study of the Spirit through the scripture, you will find time after time that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit is a “community event”—the Spirit almost always comes in the middle of a crowd and the impact is very visible, and time after time, the Holy Spirit is the one who demonstrates the inclusion of all of us into God’s family. (It’s Luke’s theme all through Acts—“the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” in Cornelius’ household [chapter 10] and again in Antioch [11] and throughout Asia Minor [13ff]. Certainly that’s what happened here at Pentecost.) God the Creator is a “vertical” face of God, if you will;

God the Son is a personal teacher-companion face of God; God the Holy Spirit’s face—the third face of God—is expressed through us.

And it takes all of us, it takes the community, to express this face of God. Each of us has strengths that are distinct and unique and stand on their own, just as the Spirit does. But the expression of God through the Spirit is not complete unless every gift is added to the collective effort.

Let me use the image of the circle or the table—some of you have heard me use this more than once. Each of us, brought together around the table, places a gift on the table—individual, distinct, different, larger, smaller—all for the good of the whole, and the effect is almost always greater than the sum of its parts. This is not about competition, or comparison, or individual success—it is about our collective faithfulness in seeking the common good—the expression is not complete without your gift, without your face.

You, we all, together, are the face of God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is community.

But it doesn’t just sit there. What are we going to do with the gifts on the table?

I think God is a collaboration, kind of like the Food Club. You’ve heard about the Food Club; a number of Westminster members are volunteers there. The Food Club provides a grocery-store

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experience for low-income households who pay a small membership fee to shop for food with the choice and dignity of a consumer experience. We, Westminster Church, are one of seven partner organizations who sat around the table and put our individual gifts and time and energy into a project that became our mutual agenda. No one of us had the whole idea; surely none of us had adequate resources or capacity to put it together by ourselves; and the project is really bigger, fuller, more boisterous, more cutting-edge than any of us was likely to do on our own. The Food Club has become free-standing, both as an expression of itself and as an expression of the partners that now show up in the faces of its members, who are the final, essential, face of the collaboration.

You are all involved in such collaborations—partnerships, efforts, projects, ministries—and simple individual service; but every such collaboration requires someone in addition to you. Perhaps you spend time with the members of the Food Club; perhaps you will be part of the Linking Lives Opportunity of this week, listed in the bulletin, as a GED tutor at Heartside Ministry; perhaps you will spend a few hours at Camp Sunshine in July at Camp Henry, providing a respite for counselors—in every case you know that you will be inspired, and in your activity and in your relationship you will see the expression of the Holy Spirit in the faces of each other.

Holy Spirit activity never exists in a vacuum, and that activity is dynamic, active, invigorating—and “in community.” God the Creator brought forth all that is, out of nothing—no one else was needed. God the Son, the Word, is sufficient for salvation; but the Holy Spirit is not complete until we become her face for each other.

We, community, with different gifts and skills and interests and abilities; from dozens of places around our region; here on Sunday; here during the week; out there; receiving from others; giving our best— we complete the picture.

In the name of God: Creator, Christ, Spirit. Amen.



Fresco of the Trinity from
St. Jakobus Church,
Urschalling, Bavaria
c. 1400

Acts 2:1-21

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5Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

“The Trinity”
Andrei Rublev (Russian)
Angels hosted by Abraham
(Gen. 18)
C. 1411

