

Preaching Pentecost in Today's Changing World

Catherine Gunsalus González and Justo L. González
Decatur, Georgia

The story of Pentecost begins, “When the day of Pentecost had come. . . .” Today, when we Christians hear the word *Pentecost*, we immediately think of the descent of the Spirit and the birth of the church. But for the early disciples, Pentecost was a feast in the Jewish calendar. The term *Pentecost* simply means “fifty,” in this case, days, and it was the Greek name of the Jewish celebration that took place fifty days after Passover. The early disciples had been told to await the Spirit that Jesus had promised, but on this particular day, they were gathered to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Because it was on Pentecost that the promise of the Spirit was fulfilled, Christians now celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit fifty days after Easter. There is no evidence that Christians kept such a feast fifty days after Easter until late in the second century. At that point, there is evidence in both Irenaeus and Tertullian that the Sunday seven weeks after Easter was a major holy day in the church, a celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, and a time to administer baptisms that for some reason had not been possible at the Easter festival. But, since by then Christians were devising their own methods to determine the date of Easter, quite independent of the Jewish Passover, to this day the Jewish festival rarely coincides with the Christian one.

Within Israel, this feast is known as “the festival of weeks,” because it comes a “week of weeks” after Passover — that is, seven weeks. Originally it was a harvest thanksgiving festival, but at some point it became also a celebration of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. The feast of Passover celebrates God’s freeing the slaves from the yoke of Egypt. Fifty days later, Pentecost celebrates the gift of the law and the covenant at Sinai which really established Israel as God’s People. Pentecost is the closing of the whole Passover celebration, much as the Christian Pentecost closes the Easter season.

For the early church, Easter paralleled Passover, for it too celebrated a liberating act of God, but it was freedom from an enemy far greater than Egypt: freedom from the power of sin and death. Fifty days later, the gift of the Spirit created a new People of God, no longer only from diverse tribes, but ultimately from nations and languages and tribes from the whole earth.

There were three times in the religious calendar of ancient Israel when all males were expected to come to the Temple with the appropriate offering: Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths — which does not concern us now. Such a pilgrimage was a relatively simple process when the religion of Israel was the faith of a small nation, limited to those who lived within the borders of the nation itself. But by the time of the founding of the church, a great deal had changed from the days of Exodus 34:22-24, Leviticus 23:15-16, or Deuteronomy 16:9-10, where we find the institution of this holy day. Because of the Babylonian Exile and then the rise of the Greek and Roman empires, both of which included Israel, there were now Jews all over the Mediterranean world and even beyond. They could not come to Jerusalem every year for the holy days, even though many hoped to come at some point in their lives. In

that pilgrimage, it would make sense to come for Passover and then stay at least until Pentecost. So, in this very cosmopolitan world of the first century after Christ, it was not surprising that, as Acts tells us, there were in Jerusalem on this day of Pentecost, “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). Nor is it surprising that many, if not most of them, did not understand the Aramaic of the local people. Probably most could converse in Greek, although this was less true of those who were born and raised in Judea, for whom Aramaic was their native tongue.

All of this means that at the point of the birth of the church within Israel, Judaism was already a global phenomenon—at least as global as the reach of the Roman and Parthian empires and somewhat beyond. We also know that at that time Judaism was a proselytizing religion, quite ready to add to Israel those who were not Jews because they had not been born to Jewish mothers. Judaism had been sufficiently severed from its earlier limited geographic character that one could be a Jew without ever setting foot in the Holy Land, although there was the desire to go there on pilgrimage at least once during one’s lifetime, and even to die there. That proselytizing character of first-century Judaism and its geographical spread is absolutely essential to understand the development of the early church. The new Christian faith would be even more proselytizing and even more global in its outreach than was Judaism. It would include those who had no background at all within the mother faith, Judaism. The early church’s tie to a specific geographic location was less than the attachment of Diasporal Judaism to Jerusalem, but Judaism itself had already moved beyond the limits of a national religion. This non-geographic, trans-national character of Judaism at the time of Jesus is part of the *kairos* of God’s timing for the incarnation.

The World Today

It could be said that what is happening now in many of our churches in the Western world is a return to the global character of the faith at its birth. In other words, the faith of Israel was, for generations, the faith of a people living in a certain geographical area. If you were born there, if you were part of the people of that area, then you worshiped the God of Israel. But the cataclysmic events of the Exile and the spread of empires had altered that. Christianity therefore began as such a transnational, cosmopolitan faith, which had little or no ties to a specific geographic territory. That situation changed in the centuries after Constantine, when Christianity became again what the faith of Israel had once been—the faith of those born in a certain territory, the faith of those who were part of a particular culture, in this case the developing civilization of Europe. This continued for at least a millennium. It is only now, at the end of the Constantinian era, that Christians in what used to be “Christendom” are beginning to experience something like the lively, cosmopolitan church of the first century. Instead of “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia,” we have Koreans, Mexicans, Filipinos, Americans, Burmese, Indians, and Nigerians.

Today, the global character of the whole of society, with the movement of peoples from their native lands to other places—either because of disasters and wars or because of greater economic possibilities in another land—deeply affects the churches in what once was Christendom. More and more, churches right here in the United States begin to resemble the gathering at that first Pentecost more than the homogeneous congregations that were common fifty years ago. In that sense, many of our present congregations have the opportunity to experience a life that is far closer to

that first Pentecost in a way that was not possible for most churches during the past several centuries.

It is not only congregations that are changing. For generations, Ireland, Poland, and the Philippines exported Roman Catholic priests to areas of the world in which there were shortages. Today, Ireland is importing African priests because it no longer produces enough priests of its own. The areas of the world in which Christianity is fairly new—areas never part of the old Christendom—have priests to share with the old, traditional areas of the church that are now unable to supply their own leadership.

Protestant churches are affected differently, but the changes are just as great. In our case, it is more likely that the changes will be seen among the laity than among the clergy. (For many of the traditional “mainline” denominations in the dominant culture, there would indeed be a shortage of clergy had it not been for the fact that most of them now ordain women!)

What does all this mean for us? Several things can be said. First, above all, a congregation that is trying to figure out how to incorporate within its fellowship those who come from another country, and who speak another language, is really finding itself dealing with the same issues that those early Christians about whom we read in the New Testament faced. This is a new situation for us, but it is hardly new for the Bible, and we should read the Scripture lessons for Pentecost with that in mind. Pentecost calls us to restore a way of being church that evidently is important to God’s timing of the incarnation itself.

Second, because we are in the midst of a great transition in our society, there are congregations in this country that still have the monocultural character that was typical of most churches in the past. They have not yet experienced the dynamic, cosmopolitan character of that original Pentecost. It may well be that their communities have not changed, or the congregation does not see the changes that are occurring around them, or it does not wish to see them. The message for such a congregation is that there is a new world on the horizon, a time of great change throughout our culture. The demographics of the last census make it clear that the future of the whole society is far more multicultural than many are ready for. We need to prepare such congregations for the future that is upon them and help them greet it positively, with open arms and open doors, as something that God is doing in our world and in our time. Pentecost is a great occasion for such a word. There is work to be done in preparation for such change. Where do our churches see the beginnings of such change in their community? What ought to be their response?

Third, areas that were once almost totally Christian now have sizeable populations of followers of other religions, so that the conflicts that once took place among nations are now present in our very neighborhoods. We see that in Great Britain and France, where Muslim populations are increasing even as many from Christian families are no longer connected to the church in any serious fashion. We see it in many of our cities and suburbs, where not only mosques, but also Hindu and Buddhist temples are being built. Christians in this society who have never had to consider what is the relationship of Christianity to other faiths or how Christians should relate to those of other faiths are now being forced to consider such questions. They need guidance in this quest, and the leadership of the church is not always prepared to give it.

Fourth, when many denominations and congregations in our country are recording

constant losses of membership, it is often hard for them to believe that in countries they never thought of as Christian, churches are growing rapidly and are sending missionaries all over the world. In many of our churches, the average age is constantly rising. But there are new churches in Africa and Asia—and among immigrants in our country—that are filled with young people. Our churches are so used to being the ones who send missionaries to others that it may be difficult for us to see that mission is ongoing and successful, even when we are not doing it. We need to be aware of these new churches and their work, and rejoice that we are part of the same body of believers. We need also to ask why such a change has taken place, and how can we assist in the work that now seems to be in other hands.

The Lectionary Readings

When we look at the lectionary passages for this Pentecost Sunday, there are some elements that could be useful in dealing with the issues outlined above. Obviously, Acts 2:1-21, the account of the first Christian Pentecost, needs to be mentioned, especially as it demonstrates the transnational character of the Judaism at the time. If the incarnation had happened during the time of Solomon, would it have had the same impact? Why was the first century the right time within Judaism as well as within the broader history of God's world?

In Ezekiel 37:1-14 (the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones), Israel is pictured as a dying, national religion because of the Exile, the setting for this prophet's work. But in his vision this people is to be reconstituted through the work of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, not geography, not genetics, not common language and culture, that holds together the People of God. That was true in the time of Ezekiel and a hard lesson that Israel was forced to learn. It is equally true for Christians today, a hard lesson we also may be forced to learn if we do not open ourselves willingly to its truth. If our congregations are monocultural; if they cannot see how the church can exist in some other way; if they see themselves slowly dying because there are fewer people of their culture in the area who are interested in the church; then Ezekiel's words are a word of great hope to them. But it means allowing the work of the Spirit to expand their horizons and to discover that it is not the same culture, the same language that holds the church together. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Psalm selection: 104:24-34; 35b is part of a lengthy praise psalm that shows the God of Israel as the creator and Lord of the whole world, not limited to one people or one place.

The Epistle lesson from Romans, 8:22-27 is very helpful. God's purposes are always being worked out in the midst of a fallen world. Yet what God is doing is bringing that creation to the goals for which it was created in the first place. Paul understood that such redemption meant pain and confusion precisely because the fallen world and God's plans rarely agree. But Christians are those who know that God is in the process of redeeming this fallen world, and the incarnation, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are key moments in that process. Because we believe this, we trust the work that God is doing. We do not understand all the changes that are going on around us. But we trust that God is working in the midst of all these changes, working for the good of the world. It might be helpful to stress verses 26-27, that often in the midst of the chaos and conflict the changes in our society are bringing, we do not know what we should pray for. There may well be a difference between praying for what would make us comfortable and praying for what God is

doing. God knows that, and the Spirit can help us. The Spirit can search our hearts so that we can come to a greater understanding of what God wants for us, for our church, and for our society. (It is tempting to add verse 28 to the lectionary reading, as a reminder that in the midst of all the chaos, God is working for our good.)

The Gospel reading is from John 15:26-27 and 16:4b-15. Here Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will come to the church after he has returned to the Father. The work of the Spirit is to lead the church into greater knowledge of the truth. Jesus expects that the church will face new situations and will need guidance. It is the Spirit who will provide that help. Verses 12-13a are interesting. Jesus tells the disciples that they were not yet ready to hear all the things that he could tell them. But the Spirit would guide them into such truth. There are many congregations that are going through very difficult times: the congregation has shrunk; few young people are members; the building is too big for the numbers they now have; simply maintaining the buildings takes more and more of the budget. There are new people moving into the community, but they do not speak the same language or they are from a different culture. There are indeed new truths that need to be learned. Such a congregation needs to be assured that Jesus fully anticipated such events, and the congregation has not been left to its own devices to figure out what is to be done. The Holy Spirit has been given to them. If they wish to know how to proceed, they need to hold to the promise that the Spirit will indeed lead them into all truth. Their task at the moment is to prepare themselves for hearing what the Spirit is saying to the church.

If there is no need to use the lectionary—except perhaps for the traditional Acts passage—then there are other possibilities for preaching on this occasion. One is the vision of John at Patmos that describes the church triumphant gathered around the throne of God and representing all nations, tribes, and languages. Another is the refrain found so often in the Old Testament that all nations will come to the Holy City because there they can find the Law whose following brings peace to the world. We have also the words of Jesus that the community of faith is to be like a city set on a hill, so that it provides a model to others of how God has created us to live. The law—and even more, a community that lives by it—is a powerful witness to others. In a world where religions and nations and neighbors clash, such a witness is invaluable. The local church is a witness in the life it leads as a community as well as in the work it does in the larger community. If the congregation seals itself off from the changes that are occurring in the world around it, its witness will hardly be helpful to the world. Finally, there are many references in the New Testament to the character of the church as bringing together people who were once strangers and now form one people. This includes all those Christians around the world whose numbers and strength might astonish many struggling congregations in our country.

It is no accident that Pentecost rapidly became a time for baptism in the early church. Normally, by the middle of the second century, all the catechumens—those preparing to become part of the church—were baptized during the Easter Vigil. The imagery was clear: in baptism they had died with Christ (in changing their behavior and thinking from their pagan past), and in coming from the baptismal water, they had indeed risen with Christ, ready now for the first time to join the congregation in the Easter Eucharist. But there were probably always some people who could have been baptized at Easter, but illness or some other significant event had prevented it.

Therefore, these persons could be baptized at Pentecost. Now the emphasis would not be so much on the dying and rising with Christ, but rather on the power of the Holy Spirit who has recreated them as children of God and joined them to the family of God, brothers and sisters of the Son of God himself. In the Roman and Hellenistic culture of those early days, it took a great deal of effort to remove someone mentally from the structures of households, social status, gender relationships, and make them part of this new society. As Paul wrote to the Galatians (3:27-28), "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." It was the power of the Holy Spirit that enabled this to happen. If there is a baptism on this Pentecost Sunday, the reading from Ezekiel would be helpful. It shows that baptism is not simply an individual matter, nor does it mean becoming part of this local congregation. It involves becoming part of this vast body of believers made alive by the Spirit, a body that without that Spirit is simply a collection of dry bones with no life and no future. Those being baptized this day are being united with all those Christians in Asia and Africa, as well as with all those Christians in different congregations in their own neighborhood who may seem quite different from them.

In congregations that normally celebrate communion on the first Sunday of the month, thought has to be given to the important meaning of the Eucharist on Pentecost, even when it does not fall on such a day. (The same is true for Easter, but that is a word for a different time.) If communion is celebrated on Pentecost, what comes to the fore is the significance of the Holy Spirit in uniting all those who receive the bread and cup. Usually the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving concludes with words that implore the Holy Spirit to use these elements so that they are for us the body and blood of Christ. They are one of the means by which we are united with one another even as we are united with Christ. Especially at Pentecost, we need to expand our vision of the church as the Body of Christ to include the wide variety of peoples whom the Eucharist unites with Christ as well as among themselves.