Reflection on the descent of the Holy Spirit

Numbers 11:16-30

1. The meaning for Pentecost for Christianity

We celebrated Easter on April 1 this year with churches all over the world. Today, 7 weeks later, we are celebrating Pentecost --the day the Holy Spirit descended and the Church was launched on its world mission. Easter and Pentecost are closely related within church tradition. At Easter we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, the foundation of our Christian Faith. Christ's triumph over death revealed God's justice and love and opened to humanity the new life in Christ. God's love overcomes hatred. God's life overcomes death. Light prevails over darkness, righteousness proves stronger than the evil intentions of this world's false rulers, and the truth overcomes the lie.

Pentecost is about our place in this new creation that burst forth on Easter morning. Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian church. Because the Holy Spirit descended, a group of disciples who were full of sadness and fear were transformed into courageous and fearless witnesses. They boldly went forth to testify that God had raised Jesus from death and that he now was Lord of heaven and earth. Their witness touched many people to repent and become followers of the Jesus Way. The Holy Spirt bound these believers together to worship and minister as one body,

and the Church began its amazing spread to all regions of the globe. Today we worship our Lord from Jerusalem to northern New Jersey to Taiwan. There is no doubt that we are the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

2. The Holy spirit empowers us and gifts us to serve God

Our scripture this morning, Numbers 11: 16-30, records the actions of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. God had liberated the enslaved Israelites, leading them out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. For years they wandered through the wilderness, at last coming to Mt. Sini, where God renewed his covenant with Israel and gave them the Law to guide them. During their time in the wilderness they faced many trials, among the worst being the lack of meat and a secure supply of water. They had only Mana for food, and at length grew tired of the daily struggle to survive. They recalled the fish they used to eat in Egypt, as well as the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic (Num11:4). They forgot the misery of their enslavement and began to complain to Moses and to God about their freedom diet! Their lack of gratitude troubled Moses greatly. He was weary of their whining and found the burden of leadership over such a difficult people too much to carry. He even came to the point where he preferred death over the status quo. In his misery he cried out to God:

“Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why…. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once….” (11:15)

And God heard Moses and intervened to change the situation. According to the text in Numbers, the Lord said to Moses, “Gather for me 70 elders of the people and officers over them. Bring them to the tent of meeting…” “I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them.” So God granted the gift of his Spirit to 70 elders so that they could all share the burden of leading the peoples rather than Moses shouldering the weight alone:

“Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.” (11:25)

The fruit of the Holy Spirit was empowerment for God’s ministry, not for Moses alone but for many other leaders as well. The same pattern that Luke describes in Acts at the Day of Pentecost is seen centuries earlier in the time of Moses, and it is the same pattern that empowers the Church today. It is the Spirit that makes us a community empowered to accomplish God’s purposes.

3. The Holy Spirit is for us all, not only a privileged few.

It is important to note that the Holy Spirit did not only come upon Moses and the elders at the tent, but also upon

others at a distance (11:26). Eldad and Medad had stayed in the camp and had not gone out to the Tent. There in the camp the Spirit came upon them, and they too began to shout like prophets. When the amazed witnesses reported this to Moses, his right-hand man Joshua volunteered to put a stop to their prophesizing (11:28). In Joshua's mind, the Spirit of God would only descend in a sacred space, in the tent and upon the elders gathered at the tent. But God is free! God forever transcends our limited understanding of his ways. The Holy Spirit is not limited to only certain places and certain people but becomes manifest wherever God wills to act.

Moses rebuked Joshua: "are you concerned about my interests? I wish that the Lord would give his spirit to all his people." Moses rightly understood that leadership is not something for an elite few to grasp and cling to tightly and fearfully, but rather an empowering of the many to join together in the shared work of God.

The story in Numbers foreshadowed the birth of the Church at Pentecost many generations later, as related in the 2nd chapter of Acts. Luke tells us that God fulfilled the vision given centuries earlier to the prophet Joel, that in the future the Lord would pour out his Spirit upon "all flesh," upon sons and daughters, old people and youth, servants, men and women. At Pentecost the Spirit fell upon 120 followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem and

empowered them to share the good news of the resurrection with a crowd of people from many nations, and that day 3000 were added to the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit transformed a small band of fearful believers into a courageous body of evangelists who began to proclaim the Lordship of Christ to people of every culture and tongue. And that process of sharing the story with the entire world continues still today.

4. Pentecost Today

The Church today needs the empowering Spirit of God just as much as the Israelites in the Wilderness and those first followers of Jesus gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. Through the work of the Spirit Christians now make up approximately one third of the world's population. The name of Jesus is proclaimed in every continent.

And yet, we are divided—often bitterly divided—by race and national loyalties, by ideologies and conflicting class interests. Like God's people of old, we still are prone to forgetfulness and ingratitude. Although God has showered us with mercy upon mercy, we follow him only half-heartedly and often with complaining hearts. We proclaim Christ as Lord with our lips, but often our deeds betray us, revealing many other false shepherds that we follow instead of Jesus.

We need the Spirit of God to fall upon us anew, to rekindle our love for God, to tie us more closely to Christ, and to bind us together into one people who are united in our dedication to the mission of God.

Sisters and brothers, perhaps we suffer from amnesia. We forget that The Holy Spirit has been given to us already. We need only to repent of our failings, to turn our hearts with sincerity to God, turn away from other Lords and trust the One who has unfailingly guided the people of God across the ages and who will continue to guide us into the unseen future that awaits us. God calls each of us to ministry and will empower each of us to do great things, if only we trust and obey. The Spirit belongs to each of us—to you and to me—as a gift. Remember that gift! Embrace it with joy and let the Spirit fill you and guide you in the way that God wants to lead you.