

Pentecost 2017

From the beginning of time, people told and re-told the story of how the earth was formed.

Everyone knew that after Marduk became the most powerful of the gods that he moved to an end an age-old conflict the other gods had with the goddess Tiamat.

Like in a cosmic *Game of Thrones*, Marduk built alliances with many of the lesser gods and then launched an all-out attack on Tiamat.

A terrible battle ensued in which Tiamat was slaughtered.

Marduk then ripped her corpse into two halves, from which he fashioned the earth and skies, and the cycles of nature.

So, everyone knew that the world was born out of a brutal conflict in the heavens, leaving hapless humans to live at the whim of distant, vindictive gods.

Abram and his clan lived on the northern edge of the Fertile Crescent – somewhat north of what would later be called Babylon and in what we now call Iraq – and they all assumed this account of creation, which makes it all that more remarkable that Abram would follow the call of a new God to travel to a strange land with the promise to become the father of a new nation ... but that's another story for another day.

Now fast forward hundreds of years.

Abraham's people arrived in Palestine and had been through a lot.

Among other things, a regional famine led them to slavery in Egypt, but after several centuries God heard their cries and intervened to rescue them.

Many generations later, a charismatic leader named David built a powerful Hebrew kingdom, but eventually it all unraveled allowing Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to overwhelm Jerusalem's defenses, destroy the temple and leave the city in ruins.

In 586 BC he force-marched many of the Hebrew people 900-miles to Babylon, where they lived in humiliating exile among their conquerors.

So, the uprooted the people were forced to resettle in pretty much the same area as Abram had lived many generations before.

Now for the first time they hear the Marduk creation story, but it doesn't resonate with them as it had their ancient ancestors.

You see, they'd had a different experience with their God, so they had a very different creation narrative.

"Is the universe a friendly place?" is the most fundamental question you must answer ... and the Hebrew's experience was

that while life could be tough, and while they would mess things up from time to time, the universe is a friendly place because God is good and cares for them.

Rather than a world created by warring gods who hold humans with disdain, the Hebrew God delighted in creating the cosmos and in making human beings for relationship.

In the Hebrew creation poem of Genesis 1, God sends the Spirit as a wind to blow across the primordial chaos to create heaven and earth, plants and animals ... and God surveys His handiwork and says *it is good*.

Then he created humankind and declared that it was now very good.

God even gives His people a day of rest to enjoy creation and to draw close to Him.

So, the Hebrew creation narrative stands in stark contrast to that of their neighbors.

Not only that, but the Hebrew God says that He is going to use these people, with their experience of a loving, personal God, as a light until the world.

A different worldview – a progression in human consciousness.

Key points:

- a progression in human consciousness
- the Holy Spirit came like a wind creating order out of chaos,
- God loves and blesses creation,
- and God cares about humans.

Now, we're going to shift in history to one of the times God intervened on behalf of His people.

God had freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt during an event we know as Passover.

So, there was a huge caravan of freed slaves walking across the desert to a land God promised to give them.

After a bit, they camp at the base of a mountain and their leader, a man called Moses, is summoned by God to the top of the mountain.

Moses remains there for forty days receiving a series of commandments about how to live as free, responsible people in a brutal and primitive world.

So, get this: Moses receives the Law fifty days after Passover.

For their time, these new rules were unimaginably progressive, and not only is Moses excited to bring them back to the people, his face is actually glowing from his close encounter with the divine.

Oh, and by the way, there is a rabbinical legend that as God spoke or wrote the Ten Commandments, 70 tongues of flame shot out from Moses' mouth and went all over the world.

Maybe you've noticed in your own life that progress is often two steps forward and one step back.

You start to a Bible study regimen, or you promise to pray every day, or you get to the gym at 6 AM ... and you do it for a month and then slip for one day, and then for a week.

Well, that's exactly what happened here.

People were following God, but after Moses was gone for a week or two, the people decided to give themselves a break.

They throw a huge party, get drunk on the wine they had carried out of Egypt, and worst of all, they make an idol out of gold and worship it.

Half way down the mountain Moses could already hear hoopin' and hollerin' party sounds, and so by the time he reached the bottom he was so furious that he smashed the stone tablets on which the new rules had been written.

He then took their idol and ground it into powder, mixed it with their drinking water and made them all drink it

Then he ordered the Levite tribe to take swords and go through the camp and kill people, which they did.

The bible says about 3,000 people died that day.

Key points:

- A progression in human consciousness
- 50 days after Passover,
- God gives new ways for living,
- tongues of fire,
- people are drunk,
- 3,000 *die* because they failed to progress.

The Hebrew people commemorate the day when Moses received the Ten Commandments as Shavuot, sometimes called the Feast of Weeks.

Christians call this day Pentecost because it comes fifty days after Passover, and it is on this day that the Holy Spirit came as wind to Jesus' disciples – the same Holy Spirit we met at creation that came as wind.

Then there is the report of flames coming upon the disciples, just like that the rabbinic tradition reports that the Spirit came upon Moses up on Mount Sinai.

Oh, and what was the accusation against the people when they began their inspired speech?

That they were drunk – like the unfaithful partiers at the base of Mount Sinai.

And while 3,000 were *killed* for being unwilling to progress, how many were *saved* on Pentecost?

Yeah, 3,000.

God is still speaking.

God meets us where we're at – in our culture, our circumstances, our stage of human awakening – and invites to us advance from there.

And sometimes it requires a violent, disruptive storm to get our attention.

Let's step back and get a helicopter view of religion at this time in history.

Up to this point, religions had been all about sacrifices.

People saw the gods as distant, detached and demanding.

So, people brought sacrifices to appease angry or disinterested gods: to win their favor, to beg for rain and the fertility of their women, and to atone for their sins.

The sacrificial system caused a lot of anxiety because you could never be sure that you were sacrificing enough or sacrificing the right thing in the right way.

What if your sacrifice was just a little too little?

Would that mean that your crop would fail next season and your family would starve?

This anxiety never leaves ... so you sacrifice more and more.

The Hebrew people had inherited that mindset and were expected to bring sacrifices to the Jerusalem temple, but for them it was not so much to appease God as to show humility and gratitude for what God had done.

As a matter of fact, that long, boring book of detailed rules for how to sacrifice and details of how to live called Leviticus was a revolutionary step forward because it invited people to draw close to God.

Draw close to God ... unheard of.

One of the sacrifices it taught was a meal sacrifice where you offer God food, and then later that same day you eat the rest of the food yourself as if you are dining with God.

It was a giant step forward in human consciousness.

But with the death and resurrection of Jesus, God had intervened in an entirely new way.

Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, the whole sacrificial system was no longer needed.

No longer would you bear the anxiety that you did not sacrifice enough or that you sacrificed the wrong thing.

No longer would you need a whole industry devoted slaughtering animals at the temple.

Jesus made the once-and-for-all sacrifice, so now you can let all that go because God wants to step into the next phase of relationship with His people.

Now at Pentecost, God is offering that same Holy Spirit we saw at work in mighty ways through history to personally inspire and empower people and communities to live the kinds of nonviolent, radical and progressive ideas that Jesus taught.

You don't need elaborate sacrifices, you don't need priests; the Spirit is here and now and available to all.

You may like to think of the Holy Spirit as a heavenly dove alighting on you to bring peace and comfort – which is often the case.

But Acts 2 reports that at the first Pentecost the Spirit came violently, blowing the church into existence.

Sometimes the Spirit is frightening and disruptive, especially at major junctions of life.

Acts 2:6 says the disciples were amazed, but not in the sense that we are wowed by a magic trick.

The disciples were blown away, bewildered, flummoxed.

Think of all they had been through in recent weeks:

Their teacher had paraded into Jerusalem as a king, he overturned tables in the temple courtyard, he was arrested and experienced a tortuous death.

Then there was the shock of the empty tomb, his resurrected appearance to them, and then ascension into heaven.

And now the Spirit is uprooting all that they had assumed about God and what it means to be faithful.

Think back across your own life.

How many times have you realized that God came to you in what originally appeared as unwanted disruption?

It seems that your world is collapsing when you lose a job – only later do you realize that God’s hand was leading you to a more meaningful career.

You are devastated by a break-up with your boyfriend or girlfriend, but now you see that this painful time freed you to find a healthier relationship.

Your doctor utters the terrifying word “cancer” and your world crumbles ... but in the end, you realize that in many ways your

life began at that moment as you re-prioritized and appreciated your life in totally new ways.

Does God cause cancer?

No.

But through the Holy Spirit, God will meet us in any condition we face.

God can use what He did not choose.

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

In John's Gospel, the Spirit is described as *parakletos*, the one who "comes along side" of us, the one who advocates for us, remains with us, strengthens and helps us.

Key Points:

A progression in human consciousness,
50 days after Passover,
God gives new ways for living,
tongues of fire,
people are accused of being drunk,
3,000 are *saved* because they progress,
God cares for humans in a new way.

Over the past couple of weeks, we've looked at the kind of community that the Holy Spirit formed after Pentecost.

One of inclusion where men, women, rich, poor, slaves and free shared leadership and cared for one another.

And God wants to break down the walls in your own life that separate you from the abundance, wholeness and joy that God wants you to experience.

As you trust and welcome the Holy Spirit into your life, God will break away the shame you carry for not feeling enough: rich enough, thin enough, smart enough, strong enough ... whatever lies that distracts you from embracing your birthright as a child of God.

Young, old, black, white, rich, poor, gay, straight, alien, citizen ... whatever bill of goods society has sold you means nothing in the eyes of God.

Now, be forewarned.

Just as the Spirit will heal your soul, that same Spirit will lead you to confront injustices in your world.

The disciples received the Spirit in Jerusalem, which for them at that time was a dangerous place to be.

I don't know what God has planned for you ... but the Spirit will give you the courage to face your demons within as well as the demons around you.

I don't know what the future holds, but I know Who holds the future.