

If this is the church's birthday, there ought to be a party, right? Unfortunately, we can't do this at this time. Next year for sure! As important a day as this is, one would think that an observance of this magnitude would be noticed around town, just like Christmas or Easter. But this week on the few occasions I have had to shop in stores, amazingly, not one of them indicated that there were so few shopping days till Pentecost! In fact, in all my years, the closest thing I have ever seen approaching even a hint that this special day was soon to arrive was one year in the nursery department at Home Depot where there were PENTAS on sale. (For those of you may not know, [and that included me until I looked them up] a penta is a bushy, rounded evergreen shrub with hairy, bright green leaves and dense clusters of many small, star-shaped, tubular flowers in shades of red, pink, purple or white.) So the question must be asked, "How much does a PENTA COST?" [Groan!] Anyway, that is as close as we make it to any commercialization of this holiday. Happy birthday, Church!

So every year we come to this day, the day of the birth of the church, the day when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples present in the Upper Room. Do you ever wonder, "Will that happen THIS year?" "Will THIS be the year the Spirit comes like a wind and we speak in other tongues?" Well, not in Episcopal churches in Virginia anyway. Next year maybe, you never know!

Every year we hear this reading from Acts Ch. 2. Yes, the one every lay reader fears with ALL those weird, unpronounceable names. The one which talks about the rush of a mighty wind and tongues like fire dancing on the heads of the disciples. The reading where the story of God is heard in Jerusalem in the native tongues of the many people gathered there for a great Jewish festival. It scares the sox off of most Episcopalians that it may happen to them. And so we wonder, "Will that happen THIS year?" "Will THIS be the year the Spirit comes like a wind and we speak in other tongues?" Could be. You never know! Just not while we're all together.

However, that's not the place I want to focus on regarding the Holy Spirit. I want to look at the first verse of the reading in Johns Gospel Ch. 15:26-27 (not today's reading) where Jesus says, "*When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, He will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.*" I want to look at that title today. The word here is Advocate. Other translations use the words Comforter and Counsellor. These all define an aspect of the nature and ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Comforter and Counsellor bring up images of being cared for in distress and being given wisdom in various situations. But I want to look more deeply at the word used here so I will go to the Greek. The word translated in the ways I've mentioned is Paraclete in the Greek. Not Parakeet, the bird, but Paraklete. It comes from combining two words in Greek. Para which means next to and kletas which comes from the root word kaleo which means to call. Next to and called or called next to. Better said – the One called alongside. Jesus will send the One who is called alongside, the One called to be next to. Next to you. Next to me. Present with us. This ministry of the Holy Spirit as defined by this "title" is that of presence – always with us.

I want to say here that I focus on this today because of our current situation. Not Covid 19 but priest leaving. I know there is some fear/anxiety among many because I am leaving to retire. It is understandable. I have fears too about what to expect in this next chapter of Dale's and my life together. It's normal and understandable but not necessary. Though I will no longer be your sheepdog, Jesus will still be your Shepherd! That's what truly matters. As we walk our separate paths, the Spirit of God is here with us to lead and guide and comfort us on the journey regarding what comes next. I hope that on this day in which we celebrate the Spirits coming, we may be aware of and take comfort and strength in the presence with us of the Holy Spirit of God almighty.

This role or ministry of the Holy Spirit is a little like being married. When I asked Dale to marry me, I was asking her to come alongside me for all that life had in store for me and thus for us. And I was agreeing to walk alongside her in the same way. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health. This is how the Spirit is with us. He is here to help us as we walk along the path of life. Here! With us! Always!!!

The Spirit may be likened to a service dog, say, a companion dog for a blind person. Where is the dog when it is working? Right next to the person.

Leading them as they are alongside their owner. Warning of danger, guiding in the right direction, helping them in countless ways large and more often small. The blind person may take the service dog for granted in some ways but they don't ignore the leading of their service companion. Can we say the same of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Do we pay attention to that small voice that speaks to us in many and various ways or do we ignore it? We can easily ignore the Spirit which surrounds us and just go our own way. Or we can give in to God's leading and see what happens.

It's like the story of the shark and the whale. Both were swimming in the sea when the shark swam up to the whale to engage in conversation. As they swam along, the shark said to the whale, "You are so much older than I, and wiser too. Could you tell me where the ocean is?" The whale responded, "The ocean is what you are in now." The shark would not believe it. "Come on, tell me where the ocean is so I may find it!" The whale repeated, "The ocean is here, now; you are in it. You are surrounded by it!" Unbelieving, the shark swam away searching for the ocean.

Clearly the shark had something in mind other than the ocean when he was searching for the ocean. Sometimes we have something particular in mind about the way God will lead or guide us when all the while God is tapping on the shoulder and we miss it because that's NOT what we were looking for.

Expect God to be with you. Expect God to lead you. Don't tell God how to do it. Listen, then follow. Whether in big things or little things – listen, then follow. The Spirit will lead you, strengthen you, encourage you, even convict you but He will never ignore you or desert you. If you think you're in good hands with Allstate, just think of what good hands you're in with the Holy Spirit of God.

In the years that I have spent with you, I hope that I have somehow imparted to you the ability to truly be Pentecost people. BE Pentecost people! Move in the wisdom and power of the Spirit. Walk in the strength and comfort He brings. Be led and guided as a congregation to the next leader God has in store for you. There IS someone for you. For YOU. Seek God and not just a priest!

Listen, then follow. That's all you have to do. On this Pentecost Sunday and every day – Go with God because He always goes with you.

Let us pray:

O God of peace, *who has* taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of *your* Spirit lift us, we pray, to Your presence, where we may be still and know that *You are* God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*