

Sermon Text: John 15:26-27 and 16:4b-15

You know we sing about the Promised Land very often, especially in the old hymns. A very few miles from here, you will pass through a community that has a sign saying, “Promised Land.” Now, I’ve been there, and that ain’t what we’re singing about. I look a little further away to modern Israel, and I say the same thing. That can’t be what we’re singing about. There is a connection between the Promised Land and Pentecost and the fire that began in Acts II.

You know, in the Jewish calendar, nothing is more important than Passover. That’s the sparing of death, the freedom from slavery and bondage in Egypt, and 50 days is important. 50 days after that is Pentecost. Now, that is the day of Jewish thanksgiving for the first fruits of the harvest, and also on that day of Pentecost, each year along with the thanksgiving of the harvest of the first fruits is recited a particular verse from Deuteronomy 26:3, “And you are to say to the priest on that day, if you are an orthodox Jew, today I declare to the Lord God that I have come into the land which the Lord swore to our ancestors.” Now, there is an exacting parallel with Jesus’ crucifixion and what happened on that first Christian Pentecost. You know, Jesus of whom John the Baptist said, “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” At Passover, Jesus died on the cross, and then 50 days later, at Pentecost, 120 believers were touched by the Spirit of God as an indication of the great harvest of everlasting life, which Jesus had won.

The Holy Spirit descended, and the church was empowered and born that day, the same day that the worshipers were saying what they always said, “Today, I declare to the Lord God that I come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors.” The 120 were the first of a vast harvest, and you and I are among that harvest, the first to have God’s Holy Spirit with and within.

Now, this is new territory indeed. This is the Promised Land. Slavery and bondage in Egypt symbolize slavery and bondage to sin, and the Passover symbolized freedom from death through the blood of the lamb. The new territory equals God within, making us new creatures, a new creation from the inside out. The Promised Land is not a place. It is arriving home with God.

Remember, these disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. They were emphatically ordered by Jesus, “Stay.” That’s a command that my new dog does not yet understand, “Stay.” Jesus was saying don’t even try to carry on my ministry unless and until and after you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. They waited, and on the old traditional Jewish harvest festival called Pentecost, something did happen. They waited in the city ten days, and I’m sure they prayed and they talked about all that Jesus taught and the miracles and the conflicts with the Pharisees and His resurrection. I can imagine they were asking, “Now, what? I have risked a lot following Jesus, and Jesus was here, and then He was dead, and then He was here again, and then He

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Sunday, June 4, 2006

ascended. Now, what? What are we waiting for?” Pentecost answers now, what for them and for us.

From the beginning, Genesis bespeaks God’s desire to be in relationship with us. We were made to be in relationship with God. From the beginning, we cast God out of our hearts and cast ourselves out of God’s embrace. The entire Scripture, Old and New Testament, is the story of God ruling us and being exasperated with us and reminding us and warning us what we were made for – for God and for each other and for love and peace and unity of spirit.

Egyptian slavery was a deep symbol and also a tortured reality of the pain of separation from God. God’s leading the children of Israel through the desert as a fire by night tells of our dependence upon God to guide us through this dark world. The manna that they ate while wandering in the desert was a mere shadow of the true bread from Heaven, which is Jesus Christ. He came to feed us in our souls what we yearn for and what we need to be healed and to grow in holiness and spiritual health. What we need is a spiritual embrace, not a physical place. We need a spiritual embrace, not a physical place.

When Jesus spoke of a new birth and a new life and new creation, He was speaking of God’s power and God’s initiative to take up residence in our hearts and to restore His original dream of who and what we should be.

Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, and old things have passed away, and everything has become new.” Pentecost is more than head knowledge of who Jesus was. It is a second creation, a new breathing of God’s spirit into the particles of dust we are, and a restoration of the consciousness and the ability to live a new life, to live as Jesus lived and to love as Jesus loved.

Jesus told them not to leave Jerusalem because they were not yet ready, not yet new, not yet empowered, not yet equipped to carry on the kingdom building that Jesus had begun. Pentecost fulfills what Jeremiah longed for when he preached. He was speaking of God, and he said, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” It is also what the prophet Joel predicted. He said, “Afterward, in the last days, I will pour out my spirit on all people.”

God within us is the Promised Land. God, the Holy Spirit, still wants to live in us, fill us, and fire us up to do what? To live the life of Jesus in this world, and to be restored to God’s original plan for us so that we can live before Him with clean hands and a pure heart. If you’re not there yet, then today is a good day to begin. If you’ve committed and wandered off, today is a good day to recommit. You’re going to already be at the altar, already discerning the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and sets us free for new life. Today is a good day to begin. The power is for the church as a whole. The purpose of the spirit is to empower the church for witness. Every individual person has different feelings and experiences of God, but private experience is

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not the point. The point of God’s Holy Spirit indwelling in God’s people was and is for the entire church, not some private spiritual party off in a corner. We, we all, are in this thing together. Of course, we will be changed, and of course, God in our hearts, active and powerful, will change the way we live in the world and the way we live with one another. We know that we need to be changed, and we know all the promised lands that we have sought and that we have bought were empty. If you want that inner change, if you want that peace and ability to love and forgive that Jesus promised, if you want to see yourself as part of something larger and more important than private faith and feelings, then come forward today and actively pray, and ask God to enter further into your heart, into your soul, into your life. Ask God to enter past those locked doors that we keep God out of. Ask God who always has knocked at the door of your heart to enter all the way in. Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses.”

The comfort of the Holy Spirit is real. The peace of the Holy Spirit is real. The courage and the power of the Holy Spirit are real, but the purpose of all of these is to give us a firm foundation from which to witness our faith in the world. This is not our church. This is not our church. It is God’s church. We did not start this fire. God did. He led long ago by the pillar of fire through darkness, and God gave the fire at Pentecost. I know that I cannot, by my words alone, fire up your faith, but God can. The fire of the Spirit still burns, and can melt away the chaff, and can thaw out icy-cold hearts, and make us humans in the image of God, the way God intended us to be from the very beginning.

So come forward as I call you for communion in just a few moments. Come forward to the one who made us, and become what we were made to be, God’s church, God’s light, and God’s fire in the darkness of this world. Amen.