



## **WORSHIPPING AT HOME**

*with UCC Westerly  
during the Covid-19 outbreak*

**May 31, 2020  
PENTECOST!!!**

□ Create a small worship space in your home anywhere. Add a candle, a bible and something red in keeping with our Pentecost theme!

□ If you are doing this on your own, settle into your worship space around 9:30am on Sunday and begin. Make your list of prayer concerns. Then sit in silence and let your mind calm down. When you reach the Prayer Time in the service, aloud or just in your own mind, ask God to bless each of the persons and situations on your list. End with the Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you.

- If you are joining in the prayers during the Facebook Live broadcast, before worship take a few minutes to send them to me via text, email or Facebook message. It is helpful for me to receive them at least 30 minutes before the service begins.
- A reminder I will be streaming our worship service on Facebook Live beginning at 9:45am. You can still access it even if you are not on Facebook by going to the church website, [www.uccwesterly.org](http://www.uccwesterly.org), and clicking on the Facebook icon on the homepage.

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### **Light your candle as a reminder of God's presence with you**

#### **Gathering Music – “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”**

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**CALL TO WORSHIP** -- taken from the poem, “Remembering” by Carrie Newcomer in her book, *The Permeable Life*

I am remembering  
My unbroken self,  
Which understands that silence  
Can be considered an absence of sound,  
Or experienced as a fullness of spirit.

#### **OPENING SONG – “O Worship the King”**

[WORDS: Robert Grant & MUSIC: Johann Michael Haydn. Copyright Public Domain. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *O worship the King, all glorious above,  
O gratefully sing God's power and God's love;  
Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,  
Pavilioned in splendor, and girded with praise.*
2. *O tell of God's might, O sing of God's grace,  
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space,  
Whose chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,  
And dark is God's path on the wings of the storm.*
3. *Thy bountiful care, what tongue can recite?  
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light;  
It streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,  
And sweetly distills in the dew and the rain.*

**UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION** [from *The Iona Prayer Book*, Millar, 2000]

**O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not only remember the suffering they have inflicted on us, remember the fruits we bore thanks to this suffering: our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this. Then when they come to judgement, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness. Amen.**

{This poem was found written on a piece of wrapping paper lying near the body of a dead child at the Ravensbruck death camp in northern Germany where 92,000 women and children died. It articulates a theology of forgiveness that is nothing short of extraordinary.}

## **SCRIPTURE READING**

**Morning Message**

*"Receive the Holy Spirit"*

John 20:19-23

Rev. Ruth

## **A TIME OF PRAYER**

Pastoral Prayers

Silent Prayers

The Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you

## **OUR RESPONSE TO GOD**

Acknowledgement of Gifts & Offerings\*

\*Doxology *"Praise God from who all blessings flow; Praise Christ all creatures here below; Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter; One God, Triune, whom we adore. Amen."*

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## **CLOSING SONG – "Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart"**

[WORDS: Charles Wesley & MUSIC: Samuel Sebastian Wesley. Copyright Public Domain. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;*

*Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;  
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art,  
And make me love thee as I ought to love.*

2. *Teach me to feel that thou art always nigh;  
Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear.  
To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh,  
Teach me the patience of answered prayer.*
3. *Teach me to love thee as thine angels love,  
One holy passion filling all my frame;  
The kindling of the heaven descended Dove,  
My heart an altar, and thy love the flame.*

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

### **A PRAYER OF BENEDICTION** — [from *The Iona Prayer Book*, Millar, 2000]

May the blessing of light be on you, light without and light within. May the blessed sunlight shine upon you and warm your heart 'til it glows like a great fire where strangers may warm themselves as well as friends. And may the light shine from your eyes like a candle set in the window of a home, bidding the wanderer to come in out of the storm. Amen.

## **PASSING OF THE PEACE**

### **Music as the Service ends** — “Psalm of Glory”

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## **SCRIPTURE READING**

### **Morning Message** “Receive the Holy Spirit”

John 20:19-23

Rev. Ruth

In case you didn't know, this is Pentecost Sunday. That raises the obvious question of what is Pentecost? This is a simple question with a surprisingly complicated answer. If we were in the sanctuary at this moment instead of worshiping together in this scattered way via Facebook Live, I would ask you to tell me what you think Pentecost is. We can try that now, but you'll need to type those comments in fast!

Moving on then, Pentecost is the Sunday on which we commemorate or remember liturgically the moment when the Holy Spirit descended on the gathered apostles in Jerusalem through the rush of a great wind and the appearance of tongues of flame over the heads of each of them. This is why wind and the color red are strongly associated with Pentecost. The notion of birthdays is also a modern component of our Pentecost celebrations since it is regarded as the birthday of the church. This is because at the moment of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit of God was understood to be equally

accessible to anyone now that it had been bestowed on the apostles (formerly known as the disciples of Jesus) who in turn were charged by Jesus himself with taking his message of loving God and loving the other far and wide, throughout the known world at the time. They did and as they did small gatherings of Jesus' followers, soon to be called Christians, formed everywhere they went. These "house churches" eventually outgrew people's homes and, overtime became the edifices we know now as cathedrals and churches.

That's the simple answer to what is Pentecost for Christians. But, as I said earlier, there is a far more complex history to Pentecost than most Christians realize. Pentecost has a long and rich history in the Jewish faith where it is also known as Shavout or the Feast of Weeks. This was a great harvest festival, one of three in the Jewish faith which demanded specific sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. It was celebrated one day and seven weeks after the first Sabbath of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, also known as Passover. The roots of this festival are ancient stretching all the way back to the Penteteuch, the first five books of the Torah with references to it appearing in Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Exodus and Numbers. This matters to us as Christians because the Jewish Feast of Weeks is why the apostles were in Jerusalem on this day in the first place. The city was crowded with Jewish religious pilgrims from all over the known world at that time. In the Book of Acts, after the Spirit has descended upon the apostles, they begin speaking in tongues and all the people present heard what the apostles were saying in their own languages. The countries represented included Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya along with visitors from Rome and yet still more countries. This was part of the miracle of Pentecost for Christians, and why it is considered the birthday of the church. On this day, 2 millennia ago, God's own Spirit became accessible to everyone who wanted to receive it. On this day, the multifaceted religion we now know as Christianity came into being.

But, hold on a minute, the text we just read was not the famous Pentecost text from the Book of Acts that talks about the crowds in Jerusalem and tongues of fire and rushing wind. It was something else entirely. It was something about Jesus breathing upon the disciples and then telling them they now had the power to forgive sins. What's up with this? Well, the passage we read is one of several texts in the Gospels that describe a time when Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the disciples. And, the bestowing of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples is the whole point of the Christian story of Pentecost. So, it's interesting to realize there is more than one time in the Gospels when this happens. The Gospel of Luke mentions the Holy Spirit more times than any other of the Gospels and in Luke 11:13, it says that God will give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks. The power of the Holy Spirit was what Jesus promised to give to the disciples so that they would be able to complete what he was asking them to do. Thus the story of the disciples, now apostles, finally receiving the Holy Spirit in such a momentous, visible and memorable way as the scene described in Acts is what would have been expected, given the grand scale of Jesus' promises to them to be with them always. Interesting, though, is that in the Acts story of Pentecost, the apostles receive the power of speech –

the ability to teach and preach almost as effectively as Jesus did. Soon they would discover they also had the power to do miraculous things.

The text we read this morning from John's Gospel, though, is quite different. Here when Jesus bestows the Holy Spirit on the disciples, he does it with his own breath. This is incredibly significant because Jesus does this while visiting with the disciples the very same night he had been resurrected from the dead. So, literally, the breath they received as the Holy Spirit from Jesus that evening was the breath of new life from the very Son of God. And what did he say to them in the middle of this intimate, personal moment, far from the prying eyes of any crowds in search of a miracle or a revolution or both? He said this, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and continued, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." This is simply incredible because this is where and when Jesus gives them his most important skill – the ability to forgive sins. This is what got him into trouble with the religious leaders to the point where they felt they had no choice but to demand his death. After all, forgiving sins through the rites of the Temple were their bread and butter. What would happen to them if Jesus could really forgive sins? This is what scared them the most – that the power Jesus had to forgive sins which translated into healings and miracles of all sorts would mean their total undoing. If this man could forgive sins, there would be nothing for them to do to justify their lavish lifestyles as Temple officials. He had to go.

So, we have to wonder, when Jesus gave the disciples the power to forgive sins as he breathed the Holy Spirit onto them, what were they thinking? They had to have been scared to death! This power to forgive sins was what got him killed and now he was giving it to them? And just what were they supposed to do with it anyhow? And what was this added caveat that they also had the power to say sins would NOT be forgiven? Wow! I'm guessing no one had a good night's sleep that night, or any time after. And yet they continued on. Jesus stayed with them for another forty days and then, as we talked about the week before last, Jesus ascended to heaven while the disciples, now apostles looked on. Before this he had told them to go to Jerusalem and wait there to receive "the promise of the Father" which they did right in the middle of the Feast of Weeks, right in front of God and everybody. And they were off to build Christ's church, ready or not.

I've always been fascinated by these two very different accounts of how the disciples received the Holy Spirit. One very intimate, personal and private with just Jesus to explain what was happening and why. The other a big, showy occasion that drew a raucous crowd, something which immediately landed them in trouble with the same Temple officials who had such issues with Jesus. I wanted us to pause and think about these two very different experiences because I believe they reveal what our own experience of receiving the Holy Spirit might look and feel like. I think the Pentecost story in Acts, the big, showy life upending tongues of fire experience of receiving the Holy Spirit scares us to death. We want no part of this dramatic, life-altering entry of

the Holy Spirit into us! That's reserved for the apostles of long ago, not for us, we think. Yet, the reality is that receiving the Holy Spirit into your heart and soul should be life-upending. It should shake things up, especially in how you understand what it means to love God and how loving God changes the way you love others – strangers and friends and family alike.

Perhaps that's why this other story – this intimate, personal moment between Jesus and his closest friends – holds such appeal for me, and maybe for you too. This receiving of the Holy Spirit seems more real, more possible, even for us. But what about the whole forgiving of sins thing? Do we really have that power? Yes, we do and we always have as soon as we heard the Good News of Jesus for the first time. Jesus taught us that forgiveness is always possible, even necessary, as we surrender our hurts and our own shortcomings to Jesus. In turn we receive the unearned gift of grace, the unconditional forgiveness of our own sins. This is what gives us the power to forgive sins in those who hurt us. And retaining the sins of others rather than forgiving them? We can do it, but it's not really a good thing because holding on to anger and hurt only builds a wall between us and God, between us and Jesus, between us and the Holy Spirit and all that we can accomplish to bring about God's realm on earth, here and now.

So, I hope you will join me in wishing the church a Happy Birthday today. Imagine that candle you lit for worship is sitting atop a lovely cake just waiting to be enjoyed by you and everyone you know. Then breathe out the Holy Spirit from inside you into the world as you blow out that candle, knowing as you do that the Holy Spirit truly lives in you every moment of every day. All you need to do is let it show now and then, as it seems the right thing to do. Amen.