

“The Wisdom of Creation”

Based on Psalm 104. The Spirit Renews the Earth.

Just about everything we do in the church, if we trace it back far enough, can be attributed to the wisdom of the earth.

Communion, for example, which is of course based on the Last Supper of Jesus, began as the Passover meal was practiced in first century Judaism. That Passover meal, biblical anthropologists tell us, actually evolved from two different springtime earth-based festivals of proto-Israelites: one for nomadic herders celebrating livestock - which gives us the Passover lamb - and one for farmers celebrating the first grain crop of the year - which gives us the unleavened bread of matza. God, through the wisdom of the earth, provides!

Because of the words Jesus uses at the Last Supper, the bread and the wine have become the elements of Communion, and the symbolism of the lamb has shifted to Jesus, himself. Even so, the remnants of these earth-based festivals remain in our Sacrament of Communion. The Wisdom of the Earth for the People of the Earth.

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The same is true of Baptism. For us, this ritual washing with water, accompanied by the Spirit, is a sign and a seal of the grace of God made known to us in the Way and Spirit of Jesus. The ritual washing of Baptism is, for us, a communal event, an initiation into church membership, a blessing of babies often, a covenant of commitment with all of creation, and yes, a washing away of all that stains our souls.

But Baptism, too, emerged from first century Jewish practices of ritual washing, practices that are common among all ancient traditions, including, in this country, the Cherokee practice of *going to water* on special occasions like naming ceremonies and holidays. God, through the wisdom of the water, renews! Remnants of these water-based rituals remain in our Sacrament of Baptism. The Wisdom of the Water for the People of the Water.

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The same is even true for Preaching, that thing I am doing in this very moment. For us, we gather around a Book: the Bible, through which we say we receive, by the Holy Spirit, the very Word of God. Yours truly sifts through texts and traditions to seek a Word for our moment, something ever-present from something so ancient, something challenging yet also comforting to help us navigate our time.

The practice of preaching, too, is based on the first century Jewish practice of Torah study. We see this in Luke's Gospel as Jesus takes a scroll and expounds upon its meaning for his synagogue.

Yet even Torah study traces all the way back to the earliest homo sapiens finding our way out of the cave and gathering around a fire to learn from myth and story and song where to find the best food and how to hide from the most dangerous monster. God, through the wisdom of the Word, instructs! The remnants of these story-telling traditions remain in our practice of preaching and teaching. The Wisdom of the Word for the People of the Word.

And so we come to Pentecost, this most vibrantly RED of church festivals, which for us is filled with flames of fire, a rush of the wind, a miracle of understanding, and a new life for the Jesus Movement. Pentecost is the gift of the Holy Spirit, God-Ever-Present, who stays with us and for us once Jesus really is gone.

Yet Pentecost, too, comes from a specific first century Jewish barley festival. [Did you know you were coming to church today to learn all about barley?!]

Barley, it turns out, is something of a miracle grain. Barley yields a larger weight of feed per acre than any other small grain crop. Barley juice has the widest spectrum of all the necessary vitamins, minerals, enzymes, proteins and chlorophyll of any source on earth. Barley fights cancer, stabilizes blood sugar, prevents heart disease, protects bone health, and improves digestion. And don't forget the most important thing: barley also makes beer!

In the ancient world, a single grain of barley was more valuable than a diamond. No wonder first century Judaism celebrated a barley festival called Pentecost.

Beginning at Passover and lasting fifty days, people traveled to Jerusalem with baskets of barley carried on their shoulders. An ox with gilded horns and a crown of olive tree branches led the way. Music and song accompanied the journey. The baskets were presented to God, at the Temple, where the priests told the stories of land and people, reminding them who they really were and to whom they really belonged. There was much rejoicing and feasting before returning home. The fiftieth day of that first century Jewish festival - Pentecost - marked its culmination.

For the followers of Jesus, on that culmination of the barley festival, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit descends, the story of Jesus is told in language they all can understand, the first believers are baptized, and the church is born. God, through the wisdom of the earth and the water and the Word provides, renews, instructs! The Wisdom of Earth, Water, Word for the People of Earth, Water, Word! On Pentecost it all comes full circle.

For the followers of Jesus Pentecost becomes the day when those who had followed Jesus in his life, and run from him in his death, and muddled their way through the haze and daze of resurrection finally find their way forward and decide to get on with it.

Therapists like to think of Pentecost as the Acceptance stage of grief. The cross in all of its awfulness has been worked through sufficiently to accept it and move on. Trauma theorists like to think of Pentecost as the moment

the victim-turned-survivor of that trauma of crucifixion has decided instead to thrive. Pastors like to think of Pentecost as the culmination of a program year and a big party before a lighter load in summer. The common refrain is that Pentecost is supposed to be FUN!

All of it comes back to the wisdom of the earth and the water and the Word, with its barley festivals and its herding festivals and its ritual cleansing and its storytelling. All that has held us back is now lifted. All that has drowned us in sorrow is now released. The earth does, indeed, provide on this Pentecost, as our Psalmist sings: a bountiful harvest to be shared with all, including *the beetles and grasshoppers among the hulled kernels*, as our poet points out.

The community in the communion of all creation is wildly among us on Pentecost. The Spirit so central to this day in the church renews not only us but also the earth.

And for that, we can all be grateful.