

Descension
Acts 2:1-13
Colebrook Congregational Church
Pentecost / Memorial Day Sunday

Today is the day we celebrate Pentecost. The day when the promise of a return, made by Jesus, was fulfilled. This is the birthday of The Church. When the Holy Spirit descended upon the First Christians.

Luke and Acts are tied together by the same author, Luke the Evangelist. Two composite parts of the same story. The Gospel of Luke is the story of God made known through Jesus, His Life and Ministry, but now in Acts, it is the story of God made known through the Holy Spirit, how She moved and inspired the First Christians to set out and spread the Good News.

So, after recounting the events at the end of Luke in the first chapter of Acts, the second chapter of Acts starts with the birth of the Church of Christ. One-hundred twenty disciples of Jesus had gathered together in one place, traditionally considered to be the same room that the Last Supper was held in, during the Jewish festival of Pentecost, which was later re-named the Festival of Weeks to avoid confusion with this event. The Holy Spirit arrived in a wind and took hold of the believers. A Gift, promised by Jesus.

The Holy Spirit took possession of them and filled their hearts with a fire, giving them a power and transforming their outlook. While the believers were aware of the Spirit before this time, especially after the Resurrection, this is the first time that those First Christians were enlightened to the power of the Spirit to guide them forth out into the world.

This is Jesus' Gift to us. When we are gathered together, in Christ's Name, the Spirit is with us as well, guiding us as we follow Jesus together in our community, responding with all our efforts to His teachings to Love and Serve one another.

The disciples there were filled with such a fervor, that some observers thought they were drunk. But that was just their conviction, their joy in Christ, after the pain of the Crucifixion, followed by the relief of the Resurrection, followed by the confusion of Jesus departing a second time.

According to Luke, all those events, which we celebrate over a couple of months, happened with a couple of days. They have been through an emotional roller coaster, and finally filled with such joy and inflamed by the Holy Spirit, it is understandable why they appeared that way.

This weekend, we also celebrate Memorial Day, which started as a consolidation of many similar holidays that commemorated the Civil War. There was a huge fervor at the beginning of that War, but of a different kind, leading to many to volunteer to fight, on both sides. This day is to remember the sacrifice of those who fought for us.

The story I have today is not really my own, but that of one of my ancestors, my great-great-great-grandfather, Sanford Alvah Smith.

I've always been a bit of a history buff. And when I was in high school visiting potential colleges, my family stopped by the Gettysburg Battlefield, to see the monuments and experience some family history.

On August 4, 1862, after the Union disasters of the Peninsula Campaign, President Lincoln called for more troops. In response, Sanford enlisted in the 16th Regiment of the Vermont Volunteer Infantry as the Drummer Boy of Company B. It was a nine month regiment, serving from October 1862 to August 1863, primarily in the defense of Washington, D.C. However, in late June, they were ordered to march after the Army of Northern Virginia to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

On the second day of the Battle, the 16th was deployed as skirmishers on Cemetery Ridge, facing off against General A. P. Hill, outnumbered five to one. They were sent to reinforce the Union troops and retake the skirmish line. Sanford's Company was then ordered to go plug a hole in the line and they stayed out in a ditch between the two armies, miraculously surviving repeated attacks.

The third day of the Battle was Pickett's Charge. As soon as it was light, the Confederate artillery started to fire at the Union lines. At around 1pm, hundreds of cannons in a line over 2 miles long opened fire on the Union

center...right where Sanford's Company was positioned in support of a Union battery. Imagine what that would have been like.

Sanford's Captain wrote in a letter:

Imagine the heaviest thunder you ever heard, and have it continued for about six hours without a moments cessation, and added to that the crash and whizzing of showers of solid shot and shells that were bursting and cutting the air just over our backs as we lay on the ground, each one expecting that his turn to be hurried out of the world would come next, and you will have but a faint idea of the suspense we were in lying there with a boiling sun pouring down upon us to add to our troubles.

Then the Charge began. 12,500 soldiers started marching out in a mile-long front, across a field three quarters of a mile long, all focused on one spot. Right where Sanford was. While he watched thousands of soldiers march right at him, he probably saw his comrades from the rest of the Regiment march out into the field between two Confederate brigades and flank them both. And then Armisted's Brigade broke the Union line at the Angle. Positioned by the adjacent Copse of Trees, Sanford was right there at the High Water Mark, and his Company was among the units that charged into the breach.

After the Battle, they returned to Vermont and mustered out. Stories passed down in my family tell of how he was a different person when he came back. One can only imagine what he saw and endured. But Sanford came from a large family, having nine siblings, so he did have a support system. He returned to woodworking in Guilford, got married, and then he started his own factory, the S. A. Smith Company, where he spent the rest of his life building children's toys.

It is not only life that is sacrificed by our country's servicepeople. Innocence. Health. Sanity. Sanford was lucky, but other veterans are not so lucky. Not just on this day of remembrance, but every day, when we feel the presence and fervor of the Holy Spirit in our life, we should remember those, past and present, who have sacrificed for us, and do what we can, then they are need.

Prayers of the People

[PAUSE]

Loving God, We ask for the gift of your Holy Spirit to help us pray as we ought. We ask for the energy and vision of your Spirit for those who are tiring in the battle against injustice and oppression; for those exhausted by the struggle with poverty and hunger. We ask for the hope and comfort of your Spirit for those whose lives are overshadowed by illness or pain; for those whose lives are darkened by sorrow or bereavement. We ask for the peace and joy of your Spirit for those living in the shadow of war and violence; for those eaten up by guilt and anxiety and whose life has become hard and dry. We ask for the guidance and strength of your Spirit for those uncertain how to use their time, talents and gifts; for those tempted to do what is wrong. We ask for the love and courage of your Spirit for those reaching out to comfort the distressed; for those reaching out to others with the Good News. Loving God, We ask for the assurance of your Spirit to know your presence with us in our daily lives; in our relationships; in our work and service; in our worship; in our times of joy and pain. We especially pray for:

God of power and mercy, you destroy war and put down earthly pride. Banish violence from our midst and wipe away our tears, that we may all deserve to be called your sons and daughters. Keep in your mercy those men and women who have died in the cause of freedom and bring them safely into your kingdom of justice and peace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN