

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Acts 2:1-21

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
Confirmation Sunday, June 4, 2000.

“When the day of Pentecost had come... there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem... they asked, ‘...how is it that we hear, each of us, in our native language... Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’”
Acts 2:1, 5, 7, 8, 11

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Pentecost! The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus and ten days after his ascension into heaven. Pentecost was originally a Jewish holy day. It celebrated two things: the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai and the harvesting of the first crops of the season. Many Jews living throughout the ancient world returned to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. Among those returning Jews were Arab Jews. When we think of Arabs we usually think of Moslems, not Jews. But in those times entire Arab tribes had converted to Judaism. They became Jews and inherited the promises made by God to Abraham; promises which included the holy land as a possession. *So Arab Jews ... to celebrate*

Luke, in the book of Acts, was probably referring to the Nabatean Arabs whose capital was the city of Petra. Mark and I explored the ruins of Petra last month ~~ago~~. “Petra is surrounded by high cliffs, pierced by narrow ravines, which form an almost impregnable defence.” It was a city whose temples and tombs were carved into the mountain sides. *Perhaps from Petra* So Arab Jews¹ were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. They heard the gospel. The Holy Spirit came upon them and they accepted Jesus as their Messiah. They became Christians. So they were Jewish Arab Christians. These Jewish Arab Christians returned to their homes. Some to Petra. Some to Damascus. Some to the Arabian deserts. And some continued to live in Palestine. They became the ancestors of present day Arab Christians who still live in Israel and Jordan. *Did you know?* Father Elias Chacour, an Arab Christian living in the Israeli town of Ibbelin remarked how one of his ancestors may well have been the little boy who shared his lunch of loaves and fish with Jesus. Palestinian Christian Arabs, then, are the spiritual ancestors of Jewish Arabs who heard the gospel on the day of Pentecost and accepted Jesus as their Messiah.

Now jump ahead 2000 years. Recently Mark and I spent two and half weeks in the Holy Land. We spent a lot of time talking with Arab Christians, spiritual descendants of those Arabs present on the day of Pentecost. When we hear the word Arab most Americans think "Moslem." We think "Terrorist." When the explosion ripped through the federal building in Colorado several years ago Arabs were the first to be blamed. Hollywood portrays Arab as schemers, cruel, blood thirsty, fanatics. Mark and I saw no evidence of Arab terrorism. Instead we found Arabs who pride themselves on giving hospitality to travelers. For example, we came upon nomadic Bedouins, Moslem Arabs, when we were hiking in the Jordanian wilderness. They invited us, complete strangers, into their tents for tea and coffee. We couldn't speak their language. They couldn't speak English but they welcomed us. Arab Christians and Moslems welcomed us everywhere with open arms. In Jordan we asked two Arab policemen if we could take their picture. We told them we were Americans. They said, "Americans. You are our friends." Arab Christians and Moslems were careful to make a distinction between decisions of the American government which ignore Arab interests, and Americans whom they welcome with open arms, not only because of the tourist money, but because hospitality is at the heart of their ethnic heritage.

Turn your attention to the West Bank. The West Bank refers to territory on the west bank of the Jordan river which doesn't belong to Israel. In 1967 Israel, expecting an attack by Arab nations, made a preemptive strike against unprepared Arab states; Jordan, Syria and Egypt. Like a Nazi blitzkrieg they quickly conquered the West Bank. Israel has occupied the West Bank ever since. The West Bank is not Israeli land. No one recognizes it as Israeli land. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs live on the West Bank. ^{& hardly any Jews} Mark and I spent a good bit of time visiting on the West Bank. For example, we were invited to the home of a former mayor of Nablus, an Arab Moslem. His town is 100% Arab. As mayor of the town he angrily protested when the occupying Israeli army confiscated Arab land for Israeli settlements. Can you imagine if the United States government had confiscated Japanese or German land without compensation during the post World War 2 occupation and given that land to Americans. That's what

Israel has done. When Israel confiscated Arab lands in the town of Nablus on the West Bank, the mayor understandably angrily protested. He passively resisted. He was threatened but he continued to protest. One morning he got into his car and a car bomb blew off both his legs and nearly killed him. The car bomb was a not too subtle warning to stop causing problems. The mayor is not a terrorist but he continues to protest and resist confiscation of more Arab land. But you can begin to understand why a minority of Arabs turn to terrorism.

The West Bank town of Hebron is sacred to Jews, Christians and Moslems because it's the burial place of Old Testament patriarchs. Israel has confiscated Arab lands in Hebron without any compensation. We visited one of the Jewish settlements in Hebron. I asked the spokesperson, "Have you compensated the Arabs for taking their land?" She responded, "No! Why should we? It wasn't there land." "What do you mean it wasn't there land? They have deeds." "It is not their land. God gave us this land. The Arabs may live where we let them live as long as they don't protest. But if they resist and protest we will ruthlessly crush them as God has told us to do." With attitudes like that it's hard for me to imagine peace in the Middle East.

Now turn your attention to the nation of Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Arabs live in Israel as Israeli citizens? They are Arabs but they are also Israeli citizens. Israel, their own nation, treats them like the United States treated African-American citizens in the days of segregation. Israel has institutionalized a form of apartheid subsidized by billions of United States taxpayers dollars. Arab Israelis cannot travel freely in their own country. They cannot buy land where they want. Arab Israelis are second class citizens. They receive poor social services. Roads in Arab Israeli villages are filled with pot holes and are often not even paved. Many Arab Israelis have had their ancestral lands confiscated, their villages bulldozed, their homes destroyed, by their own Israeli government in order to make room for settlements that exclude all Arabs. Father Chacour, in Ibellin, has been unable to return to the site of his native village from which his family fled in terror in 1948.

The Episcopal Bishop of Jerusalem, is an Arab. Not only is he an Arab Christian, he is an Israeli citizen. He tells Christian tourists. "Hey, brother! Hey, sister! It is wonderful to walk in the steps of Jesus. But we are not here to be guardians of your dear holy shrines. We are here to carry on a mission on your behalf. We are here to continue the ministry of Jesus: whether through a hospital, a school, a university, or in being involved in the social and political lives of Arabs."

He asked us to put ourselves in the shoes of Arab Israelis who have lived in Palestine for generations. Imagine that the United States government came to Oxford and confiscated your land, not for public use, but for private homes. You are forced to move. Your house is bulldozed. You are forbidden to return home. New homes are built at tax-payer expense and given to newly arrived immigrants. That's what has happened to the homes and lands of thousands of Palestinian Arab Christians and Moslem. The American Revolution began against the British with less provocation.

A hundred years ago there were relatively few Jews living in Palestine. Arab Christians and Moslems initially welcomed Jewish settlers. For the most part Jews were treated with traditional Arab hospitality. Yes, there were incidents of intolerance and hatred just as many immigrants have experienced in our country. There were also many incidents where Arab Moslems and Christians took Jews into their homes to protect them from fanatics. Attitudes change, however, when Arabs became pawns in the hands of Western nations who committed themselves to creating a nation in Palestine whose founding principles discriminated against Arabs. Arabs understandably resisted and fought and protested. Nearly everybody has come to accept the reality of the nation of Israel today. Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization all recognize the right of Israel to exist. Egypt and Jordan have signed peace agreements with Israel. And yet peace seems to be as illusive as ever in the Middle East.

Nothing but another Pentecost can spare the Middle East from continued bloody conflict. Nothing but a might outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Middle East will enable Jews and Arab Christians and Moslem to understand one another. We need another Pentecost.