**June 9, 2019**

**Acts 2:1-21**

God does lots of strange things – from flooding the world and sending a rainbow to getting big fish to swallow people. God displays God’s self to people in lots of strange and powerful ways: in the silence after the wind, as a baby in a stable, as a dove flying down from heaven... but God’s display at Pentecost must be among the top ten of strange and mysterious displays.

Pentecost is a story of old friends sitting around, waiting for something… something that they didn’t know much about, but something they *knew* they’d know when they saw it. The disciples, as usual, were completely unaware of what was about to happen. SUDDENLY! the doors flew open! A powerful wind blew through. The friends huddled together. Someone moved to shut the windows, but then they realized that the room was on fire! As they went to put out the fire, they realized that it was all around them, but not really all around them – it was hovering over them! As they warned each other of the fire overhead, the disciples realized that they weren’t talking the way they normally did. They were speaking different languages – languages that they didn’t know, from places they had never been.

The disruption in the room drew the attention of an onlooker, who yelled to others in the street. A large crowd formed quickly. The outsiders watched the disciples, amazed by what was happening. It didn’t make sense. They knew these guys. They knew that the disciples couldn’t speak other languages. This must be a performance, a joke, a party trick. Or, these people must be drunk.

But this was God. *This* was how God chose to display himself to the disciples after Jesus ascended. Jesus had been with them for years. When he left, he promised to leave his Spirit with them. He promised to baptize them with that Spirit when he was gone. And *this* was what God did! This God was not a cozy, cuddly baby (like some people remembered Jesus) or a mysterious unseen voice (like they heard at Jesus’ baptism). Neither was this God a peaceful, soaring dove. This God was a powerful, changing force – a God who blew open doors and reordered people’s lives. This God lit a literal fire within them. This God called them to something new, to something more. This God drew their attention to a new way of being and doing.

Pentecost is considered a transition point in the disciples’ ministry. It is often called the beginning of the church. The church that we know and love started thousands of years ago with these few huddled in an upper room. In the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave them a transformation plan, *not* an evacuation plan. He didn’t take them with him to heaven or some other safe zone; Jesus called them to work. He called them to participate in the future, not predict it or control it.[[1]](#footnote-1) He asked them to go out in the world and do, go and love, go and serve. He invited them (and the Spirit *launched* them) outside and away from the room, into global ministry.

It’s interesting that this was God’s choice of revelation after Jesus, the known and loved person of God left them. This moment brought out the big, bold Spirit of God who immediately transformed and troubled their community. In *my* experience, people don’t want a God who disturbs. People want a comforter, a nurturer, a companion and friend. God is certainly those things, but not today. Not on Pentecost.

The text which Peter quoted here from Malachi further illustrated this point: when God’s Spirit is poured out, it will change things. Sons and daughters and slaves will prophesy, young men will see visions, old men will dream dreams. Nothing will remain the same. Everyone will be transformed, equalized, and called to work for the kingdom. So the prophet asked, “Who will be able to stand it when God appears?” Certainly not the faint of heart or the weak of faith. For God’s coming will not be what *we* expect or control. God’s coming will not be in a small candle flame that quietly warms the corner; the Spirit will be a roaring, refining fire. It will heat us, change us, leaving only the best of us. God’s coming will not be a soft rain that gently cleans; the Spirit will be like fullers’ soap (or strong laundry soaps – like Shout!) that irritates us until the dirt comes off. The Spirit’s presence will require us to change – awkward, painful, *life-changing* change.

On Pentecost, the Spirit demanded we stop what we’re doing and reconsider our call. Today we are invited to give something more, something above and beyond. On Pentecost we are called to follow God into strange places. Because of Pentecost, our joy is to work for the kingdom of God, not just the comfortable group of friends with whom we like to stay. Because of Pentecost we are not invited to support any one church or institution; we are invited to radical, life-changing discipleship that glorifies Christ’s Church.

If Pentecost is the birth of the church, what then does it mean to be church? If it isn’t about being part of a particular group or congregation. It isn’t about choosing your friends or taking care of yourself. What does it mean to follow Jesus and be church now, after Christ’s resurrection, after Christ’s ascension, after the gift of the Holy Spirit?

Being part of Church is agreeing to be led by God. This is the story which runs through the entire Bible – from the first pages of Genesis unto the final verses of Revelation. Faithful people followed God through the Old Testament – out of Israel, into Egypt, into the wilderness and beyond. Disciples left their homes and families and followed Jesus in the Gospels. After the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, those dedicated believers followed God to strange places, speaking strange languages, and doing strange things. Those who wanted to do it their own way, stay with their own people, and maintain some pretense of control – whether Cain or Judas or the Pharisees – they became the examples of what not to do or be. They became the outsiders to the faithful. The Church follows God. Regardless of convenience, personal preferences, cultural traditions, or other circumstances, the Church follows God. Thus, when we become part of The Church, we accept that our lives are in God’s hands. As Jesus told disciples in his Sermon on the Mount, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body or what you will wear… but strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness – as well as all these things – will be given to you.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

What else does it mean to be part of The Church? Just as we admit that our lives are not our own, we also admit that The Church was and is still constantly in flux. There has never been a time when the Church was stable in terms of vision or membership or funding or security and safety. Jesus built up crowds in his lifetime, but they scattered after his death. The early church developed a strong following, but folks fled in the face of persecution. The medieval church held a lot of political power, but had very low attendance and participation from ordinary citizens. The church boomed after World War II, but has once again dipped in popularity around the globe. These giant trends affect every Christian community and congregation. Every worshipping church feels the loss when people stop coming, stop giving, stop praying, stop listening. Does that mean that we are a failure? No. We are another mile-marker in Christian history. We have the chance to be the faithful who carry The Church up the next mountain.

Being part of The Church is becoming part of a wildly diverse group of people. The Spirit unites, but otherwise we have little uniformity. As Kathleen Norris wrote, “We are not individuals who have come together because we are like-minded. That is not a church, but a political party.”[[3]](#footnote-3) So when we say, “yes” to the Spirit’s invitation to Church, we say “yes” to joining a mixed crowd. We say “yes” to living and working with people who are radically different from ourselves. We say “yes” to loving and serving those whom we never cared to know or understand, but (through the gift of the Spirit) whose languages we may suddenly speak.

Being part of The Church is participating in a dynamic, attention-grabbing community who don’t just speak to hear ourselves babble on, but who speak in ways that other people need to hear. We speak God’s language. In our living and doing and speaking and thinking, we remind the world that grace and love and mercy abound. For the first five centuries of Christianity, believers were known as “the People of The Way”[[4]](#footnote-4) because they enacted the way of Jesus’ teachings. The early church wasn’t defined by doctrine or belief or even salvation. It was defined by The Way that people lived their lives.

Unfortunately, too many people now associate Christianity with hypocrisy and extremism and judgment. We haven’t been the best advertising for God’s gift to the world. It isn’t unusual for someone to say that they consider themselves Christian, but would never join a congregation. Those folks know too well that the church is a human institution for normal, broken, sinful people who say and do stupid, selfish, cruel things. But what those folks have missed is that the church is also a divinely inspired institution, greater than the sum of its parts. On our own, we are sick, aging people with squeaky wheels and dilapidated buildings. But with the presence of God, we are healers, teachers, preachers, prophets and dreamers. We can do and be amazing things because the Holy Spirit is here. We are people of The Way: the way of love, the way of joy, the way of peace, the way of kindness, the way of goodness, the way of gentleness, the way of God. May we show this fire-y Way to the world in all that we say and think and do. Amen.

1. from October 2018 lectures by Brian McLaren, Presbytery Day on Long Island [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 6:25-34 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Norris, Kathleen. Amazing Grace. pg 272 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bass, Diana Butler. A People’s History of Christianity. pg 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)