

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/MAY 23, 2010/PENTECOST

SPIRIT SIGNS/ACTS 2:1-21

REV. DR. LYNN CHEYNEY

I. THE TEXT

On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate a wild, mysterious day of surprises – the day the church was born. You have, no doubt, celebrated this birthday many times in this sacred space. Birthdays – even 2,000 year-old ones – are for remembering. Hear the story of how it happened as recorded in Acts 2, beginning with verse 1...

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

II. PRAYER: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me, Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer... Amen.

III. ACTS INTRODUCTION

The Pentecost celebration following the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ initiated a quarter of a century of drama and intrigue... shipwrecks, narrow escapes, political maneuverings, amazing heroes and heroines – the earliest church was anything but dull. If you were to open your pew Bibles to the first page of Acts, you would see its title: “The Acts of the Apostles” – or, the story of what the disciples were up to after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Actually, a more accurate title might be, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” because it is really the story of the Holy Spirit – mentioned almost 60 times – working through individuals and communities to bring a message of peace and justice, of freedom and grace.

The gospels tell the story of Jesus – Christmas and Easter and the 33 years in-between – God putting on human flesh – God who, out of sheer love gave up heaven for earth – where we could see and touch and hear him. “But,” Jesus said to his disciples, “I’ll soon be returning to heaven – you will no longer see me.” Then, in a manner of speaking, he says, “But don’t worry, I’ll be sending in back-up – the Holy Spirit – who will be your constant companion,

guide and comfort. 'The Spirit – and you – will pick up right where I leave off.' And as Acts unfolds we see that that is precisely what happens. The book of Acts tells an explosive story of God's Spirit at work – it is a story not unlike the story we read in Genesis chapter one – *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.* Or the story we read in the baptism narratives of the Gospels as the Spirit descends upon Jesus. When the Spirit of God appears, something new and good is in the works. We find that very same Spirit hovering throughout the book of Acts.

Now, I am well aware that talk of the Holy Spirit can make us a bit nervous. Some churches go so far as to neglect Pentecost – one of the most significant holy days in the Christian Church year. This is in part, I suspect, in reaction to congregations that, as it were, celebrate Pentecost every single week. As we typically see them on television, sometimes in vast auditoriums, there is no small amount of cavorting and swaying, fainting, speaking in tongues, jumping up and falling down, claims of healing – it's a pretty amazing sight. Yet, neither an embarrassed neglect of this third person of the Trinity, nor the embrace of a "name-it-and-claim-it" Christianity that would make the Holy Spirit our personal valet seem to capture the essence of the Holy Spirit's significance. In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit – God's presence with us – is taken seriously and personally, right along with the Father and the Son. Central to the Christian faith is our belief in the mystery of the triune, three-in-one God – as the great hymn puts it – *Holy, Holy, Holy merciful and mighty, God in three persons, blessed trinity.* We do pretty well with the Creator God and Jesus Savior part of the Trinity, but many of us are not quite sure what to make of the Holy Spirit – especially when the version we see on TV makes us want to run the other way.

The dean of American Church History, Martin Marty says, "If I were to buy stock in global Christianity, I would buy it in Pentecostalism, I would not buy it in fundamentalism."¹ If by that he means a Christianity in which people risk surrendering their values, their morals, their ethics, their very lives to the God who is present to us in the Holy Spirit, I believe he is right. Theologian and Baptist minister Harvey Cox recently said in an interview that:

“there's a movement away from a more belief-and-doctrinal formulation of religion into a more experiential, practical, you might even say pragmatic understanding: How do I get through the day? How do I get through my life? What resources do I have—spiritual resources? There's a very distinct move in that direction... a movement toward an age of the Spirit, because the Spirit indicates, at least in Christian history, the personal, communal, even subjective element as opposed to the hierarchical and doctrinal element in Christianity...”²

In other words – these theologians, among others, see a shift in the Christian community to a faith rooted in a knowledge of God, a commitment to Christ, **and** a life in society and congregations empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. They are describing a Christianity that looks back to the beginning of our world... the beginning of Jesus' ministry... and the beginning of our church – a faith that looks back to our birthday.

IV. DAY ONE – THE CHURCH IS BORN

And some birthday it was: Jesus' followers huddled in a second-story room in Jerusalem. It's been 50 days since Easter; weeks since Jesus' instructions to wait for the gift, the Holy Spirit; 10 days since the risen Christ blessed his disciples and was taken up into

heaven. And so they gathered in Jerusalem to wait for the promised Holy Ghost, the one who would not need to be seen or touched or heard in order to be present – yet whose wise, comforting, guiding, caring, challenging ways will be the hallmark of the ever-present God from that day until this day.

Thousands of pilgrims are in town for an ancient Jewish holiday called “Pentecost,” the *Feast of Harvest*, when all heaven breaks loose, and in an impossible-to-describe moment – the Holy Spirit explodes onto the scene – a mighty, roaring, rushing wind hurricanes its way through the room. As the Spirit hovered over the waters in creation, now tongues of fire seem to hover over the room... something new and good is in the works. A babble of languages and the disciples don’t quite seem to be themselves. We moderns do not have a corner on skepticism – Luke reports that bystanders conclude the disciples have been downing vodka martinis since dawn and were drunk as skunks already at 9 o’clock in the morning. Peter steps up and preaches a sermon that brings in 3000 charter members of the First Christian Church of Jerusalem. Indeed, this is a very strange episode in the Holy Spirit’s story... the church’s story.

V. DAYS TWO THROUGH...

Now we, of course, are not first-century Christians, and we do not anticipate tongues of fire unless they are at a barbecue... or wild winds to whirl through the sanctuary. But we **are** children, heirs of the Book of Acts, of men and women who, guided by the Holy Spirit, brought healing and Good News and grew up a church. So the question is – what does that mean for you and me?

We are not likely to dance in the aisles, although our young theologians had a few of us doing jumping jacks during the children’s musical last week. But there are indeed signs of the Spirit: Theologian Paul Tillich wrote,

“The Spirit can work in you with a soft but insistent voice, telling you that... there are chances of a new life waiting before the door of your inner self to fill its void and to conquer its dullness. The Spirit can work in you, awaking in you the desire to strive towards the sublime against the profanity of the average day. The Spirit can give you the courage to say ‘yes’ to life in spite of the destructiveness you have experienced around you and within you... The Spirit can awaken you to sudden insight into the way you must take your world, and it can open your eyes to a view of it that makes everything new...”³

We see such evidence of the Spirit’s presence in Peter. Just two months earlier in a courtyard Peter denied Jesus... the rooster... a grim reminder of his cowardice. But that was then... on this day that same man turns into Peter the bold. His first public speaking gig is in front of thousands – he preaches so powerfully that 3000 people profess their faith in Jesus Christ that day. If we read on we discover that under the influence of the Holy Spirit the cowardly become courageous, the frightened become bold, the stingy find themselves generous... As the Spirit takes control the guilty experience grace, the miserable begin to revel in joy... When the Holy Spirit shows up the wounded emerge whole, the reluctant learn to love, and the tentative discover new purpose. Indeed, the day of Pentecost was quite a spectacle. But much the rest of the book of Acts and the New Testament finds the Spirit of God a far more subtle force. Religion professor Dale Bruner called the Holy Spirit “the shy

member of the trinity.”⁴ The Apostle Paul put it this way – where the Spirit is present there is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

VI. PAYING ATTENTION

Our work then, is to learn to pay attention to the more subtle ways of the Spirit – to learn to listen “to the still small, voice of God.”⁵ Now, the notion of God talking to us pushes us a bit. In her 80’s play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Lilly Tomlin asks, “Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying, but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?”⁶ Our tradition challenges that notion. Our faith is more open, more daring than that. God does speak to us – yes, through the Scriptures – yes, through the life and death of Jesus Christ – yes, through shared wisdom and comfort – and yes, not audibly for most, but in the quiet whispers of the heart, the nudges of the soul, the sense of conviction about what is right, a call to action about what is wrong, promptings to go this way or that, aha moments of clarity or joy or peace or beauty, questions or suggestions of friends – those are the tools of the Holy Spirit, and we would be wise to be alert for them.

In George Bernard Shaw’s play *St. Joan*, one of the characters asks Joan of Arc why the voice of God never speaks to him as she claims it speaks constantly to her. She answered, “Oh, the voice speaks to you all the time, you must learn to listen.”⁷ But if we are to listen we must risk believing that someone is speaking, someone worth listening to. Someone, perhaps, who has the power and the love to sweep into our lives, to speak into our lives, to join our lives. Professor Barbara Brown-Taylor writes:

The question for me is whether we still believe in a God who acts like that. Do we still believe in a God who blows through closed doors and sets our heads on fire? Do we still believe in a God with power to transform us, both as individuals and as a people, or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests but not anyone we really expect to change our lives?”⁸

As we move this morning out of Easter Season, through Pentecost and into ordinary time, we might want to consider beginning our days with a prayer that opens us to the Spirit of God; keeping our eyes, our ears, our hearts open and ready to risk God’s presence. It might be the simplest assignment you’ll ever get. But, if we consider what happened some 2,000 years ago as people waited it just might be the most important.

VII. PRAYER

Lord, pour out your Spirit upon us – grant us eyes to see you, ears to hear you, hearts that feel you, minds that comprehend you – that we may learn to be more sensitive to your Spirit’s every-moment-of-our-day presence. Come Holy Spirit... come. **Amen and Amen.**

¹ *More Religion, but Not the Old-Time Kind*, <http://www.rickross.com/reference/fundamentalists/fund156.html>

² *An extended interview with Harvey Cox*, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/september-25-2009/harvey-cox-extended-interview/4342/>

³ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*

⁴ Frederick Dale Brunner, *Holy Spirit – Shy Member of the Trinity*

⁵ 1 Kings 19:12

⁶ As quoted in John Ortberg’s *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, p. 135.

⁷ Ortberg, p. 136.

⁸ Brown Taylor, Barbara, *Home By Another Way*, page 144.