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“What Does This Mean?”

Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)

[2:1] When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. [2] And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. [3] Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

[14] But 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. [15] Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. [16] No, 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.

[18] Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

[19] And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

[20] The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

[21] Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

## **IS THERE ANY WIND?**

**Thomas Kinsey, a pastor in Salem, New Hampshire, told about a birthday card that he sent to his dad for his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Kinsey was looking for “that perfect card,” and standing there in the card shop, his eyes kept going back to one card ... one that had a drawing of two boats tided to a dock in what appeared to be a New England town.**

**As Kinsey continued to look at the card, he noticed that one boat was a sailboat and the other a rowboat. And for some reason he wondered to himself, “If my father had to make a choice, which boat would he prefer to cross that body of water, which would he choose?”**

**Kinsey bought the card, and in a note to his dad he shared the thoughts that he had in the card shop. Then he asked his father the question, “Which boat would you choose?”**

**Several weeks later, he received his response from his father, “I noticed that the rowboat had no engine, but the sailboat had a sail. My question before making a decision is this. Is there any wind?”**

**Today we celebrate the birthday of the church, that day known as Pentecost, that day when a Holy Wind transformed timid disciples into courageous apostles and thousands became a part of the fledgling church.**

**And the question we might ask today is, “Is there any wind? Must we spend the rest of our days rowing ... dependent only on our own power ... or might we put up our sails and catch the wind of God?”**

**There was a great wind on that first Pentecost. But, does that wind still blow today?**

**Pentecost has always been a rather strange and somewhat ambiguous event. Those who first witnessed Pentecostal power were bewildered and asked, “What does this mean?” I think we are still asking that same question. What does Pentecost mean to us?**

## **A BOOK ABOUT DREAMS**

**Pentecost is the story of a heavenly dream, God’s dream for the world. And this story is as old as the Bible itself.**

**Remember how Abraham at a ripe old age dreamed an impossible dream? He dreamed of having a family and being the father of a great nation who would be richly blessed by God. To a certain extent the dream came true.**

**But, the dream also lived on. Abraham passed on his dream to his ancestors who always seemed to believe that no matter what happened God was on their side. There were God’s chosen people. They had an important task to accomplish in the land that God would show them ... the Promised Land. They, like Abraham, would go where God would lead them. They had a sense of divine destiny.**

**Despite military defeats and exile to a foreign land, it was a dream that persisted. Despite division and warfare in their own nation, despite terrible persecution from countries that invaded their precious Promised Land, they always kept the dream.**

**One day God would vindicate his people. One day, on that great and terrible Day of the Lord, the whole earth would see his salvation. One day there would come a Messiah in the tradition of Moses who would set his people free.**

**To this day that dream persists in the hearts and minds of many Jews. I have always admired the Jews who have clung with such tenacity to this dream despite tremendous persecution and discrimination. I believe the fact that they have been able to hold on in the face of such opposition is a testimony to the fact that the dream is indeed from God.**

### **THE POWER OF A DREAM**

**People with a dream are special. They have the ability to accomplish great things and weather the storm ... all because they have a clear sense of purpose ... a sense that God is calling them to do something important.**

**This is job one for any church, to catch a vision of God's dream. We want young and old to dream the dream. We want rich and poor to dream the dream ... a common dream of hope and salvation that comes from above and beyond us.**

**So what is heaven sent dream that changes everything? The dream is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and it continues to this day through the work of Spirit empowered disciples.**

**But, there's a problem. For many of us that dream seems like something that happened far, far away and long, long ago.**

### **MISSED THAT SUNDAY**

**One year a pastor had a very small confirmation class. There were only three young girls in that class, but they were a lively group. In one session the pastor was instructing them about the festivals and the seasons of the church year. When he came to Pentecost, he asked them if they knew what Pentecost was.**

**None of them knew so the pastor said, "Pentecost was when the church was sitting in group and the Holy Spirit landed on their heads like tongues of fire. Then they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world."**

**Two of the girls took the information in stride, but the third looked astonished. Finally she said, "Gosh, pastor we must have been absent that Sunday."**

**Most of us have never seen the church as it is portrayed on Pentecost. We were absent that Sunday. But, suppose it were to happen again? Can you imagine a church filled with such power? Can you imagine a church filled with people from all over the world speaking the same language?**

**If you would dare to dream such a dream, someone would accuse you of what they accused the apostles so long ago. They would say, “You’ve had too much wine! You’ve had one drink too many. Surely you can’t believe that such a thing is possible in today’s world.**

**Today we have to be more realistic. Our dreams need to be tempered by reality. We live in a world where terror reigns. We live in a world where the falling economy dictates that we should trim our dreams to fit the current situation. What we can do is limited.”**

## **THE CHURCH LIVES BY A DREAM**

**It is the job of the church to offer hope when everyone else is offering despair. The church cannot trade in its birthright of hope for the cold, tasteless soup that some call reality.**

**In the midst of discouragement and fear long ago ... on a day that we call Pentecost ... God gave the church a dream that would not die. It was a dream that did not succumb to the demands of what the world called reality. It was a dream that created its own reality.**

**It was dream foretold by the prophet Joel who talked about a day when the Spirit of God would come upon all of his people. And everyone, young and old, male and female, slave and free would dream dreams and see visions. (cf. Acts 2:17-18)**

## **THE DREAM IS NOT LIMITED**

**One thing is clear about this dream that God gives his people. The dream is not limited. The dream is poured out on “all flesh.”**

**Men, women and people of all nations are included. There is no distinction based upon age or race. Even slaves would be filled with the Spirit. God is an equal opportunity encourager.**

**And if we are to learn to dream again, we must accept a dream that is not limited in any way. We must accept a dream that is based upon power that comes from upon high instead of power from below. Our dream must not be limited by what we can do on our own. Our dream must be enlarged by thinking what God can do with us and through us.**

## **A MIGHTY WIND**

**The Scripture tells us that the coming of the Spirit was like the blowing of a mighty wind. In fact it was reminiscent of the Spirit (or wind, the Hebrew word is the same) which hovered over the waters at creation.**

**Do you remember how the first human being was created? In Genesis (2:7) we read, “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.”**

**The God who created the first human beings is now recreating humanity through the power of that creative Spirit. The blowing of that Holy Wind at Pentecost is like a new creation. And exhibit “A” of this new creation will soon be on display ... the apostle Peter.**

## **PETER**

**Peter’s failings were many and well documented. It was Peter who repeatedly denied his Lord when the going got rough. In fact, when a maid by the campfire pressed Peter on this issue, he not only denied his Lord ... he did so with an oath. (Translation: He cursed like a sailor!)**

**But, now the wind of Pentecost has blown upon the land and who is the first to proclaim the gospel before a crowd that mocks the event? Peter. The one who only a few weeks before was unable to speak a word in his master’s defense to a serving woman at midnight now boldly proclaims the gospel in broad daylight to a hostile crowd.**

**What made the difference? In Genesis 2 the Spirit of God breathed life into dust and created a human being. In Acts 2 the Spirit breathed life into a once cowardly disciple and created a new man who had the gift of bold speech.**

**In the same way, those of us who are broken by our own very real failures and sinful actions can be restored to hope and life by the power of God’s Spirit.**

**The dream does not depend upon our power. The dream depends upon the power of God’s ever creating Spirit. This Spirit enables us to see things we have never seen, hear things we have never heard and do things we have never done. The Spirit changes our perspective completely.**

## **A VIEW FROM ABOVE**

**When Apollo II landed on the moon, some of the most impressive pictures relayed back to us were also the most unexpected. I can remember being excited at seeing the first close up pictures of the moon’s surface.**

**But, what few of us expected was what an impact would be made by a backward glance across thousands of miles of space to where we ourselves stood on the slowly turning earth.**

**The earth from this new and strange perspective appeared in its entirety, and it was overwhelmingly beautiful. As one writer put it,**

**“For a few brief moments we were give the privilege of standing, as it were, in the shoes of God after the creation and of being able to echo those words of complete affirmation when: ‘God saw ... and behold! It was good.’”**

**I think this is a beautiful example of how seeing the big picture can change our view and give us new hope. The dream of Pentecost is a big picture dream. The dream of**

**Pentecost charges us to look up instead of about. The dream of Pentecost asks us to believe the dream of Scripture that with God nothing is impossible. (cf. Luke 1:37)**

**It is obvious from today's passage that God wants us to open our arms wider. God wants us to open ourselves to the peoples of the world. God wants us to spread God's good word of grace to a world that is hungry to hear it.**

## **BABEL IN REVERSE**

**People from all over the world were present on that first day of Pentecostal power. Luke gave a laundry list of the many different countries represented in order to make the scope of the miracle more obvious.**

**Language was no longer a problem. When it came to the Gospel, there was only one language. It was the language of God's love in Jesus Christ. And everyone understood that language.**

**Many commentators have suggested that the story of Pentecost should be placed alongside the story of the Tower of Babel. Most of you remember that story.**

**In that day the peoples of the world had one language and things were looking up. Their technology had improved dramatically. (They had learned to make bricks.) And with their new found technological prowess they decided to build a tower which would reach to heaven.**

**But, God judged their arrogance. Their languages were confused, and the people were scattered over all the earth. Their attempt to reach heaven on their own was doomed to failure.**

**But, at Pentecost the story is reversed. Instead of men and women trying to get to heaven, heaven came down. The glory of God filled the disciples, and they spoke a new language. This new language was empowered by the Spirit, and it created communication on a deep level. Instead of division there was unity. Instead of despair there was hope.**

**And because these people were filled with God's Spirit, the power of God's dream, the world has never been the same since. No longer were the disciples a band of timid people hiding behind locked doors. Now they boldly preach the gospel, and their new found power and faith spills over into the streets of the city.**

**And the dream continues. The Spirit of God can make the same kind of changes in our lives today. The good news of the story is this: we don't have to build a tower to God. God has let down a ramp that we might climb up.**

**Or better yet, the wind of God, the whirlwind which took the prophet Elijah to heaven, has come to fill us here and now. Heaven has come down to us.**

## **WHY DON'T WE EXPERIENCE IT?**

**But, what keeps us from experiencing this power? Why do we feel like the little girl who told her pastor, "Gosh, I must have missed that Sunday?"**

**Perhaps, like some in the crowd on that first Pentecost, we are afraid of such dramatic freedom and change.**

**Did you notice how the crowd responded to the coming of the Spirit? Some were bewildered, but they were open to instruction. Some asked hopefully, "What does this mean?"**

**But, others' minds were closed to the work of the Spirit from the very beginning. They made fun of those Spirit filled disciples and said, "They have had too much wine."**

**This same charge of drunkenness was made earlier against Jesus himself. In Luke 7:34 we read this criticism of Jesus, "Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"**

**Why would this charge be made ... first against Jesus and then against his Spirit filled disciples? Perhaps in the Spirit empowered words of Jesus and his disciples there was a certain joy or freedom that may have suggested too much wine.**

**But, more than the manner in which the message was presented, the power of the Spirit was the power of change. And change on this level is always disturbing. As one commentator put it,**

**"The in breaking of the Spirit was profoundly unsettling and deeply threatening to the crowd in the street, and so they needed to devise some explanation, some rationalization for such irrationality."**

## **NEW WINE**

**The rationalization that the crowd came up with was that these people were drunk on new wine. But, Peter pointed out that it was only nine in the morning. The bars hadn't opened yet!**

**No, those disciples weren't drunk on new wine. But, they were intoxicated by the new wine of God's Spirit. They were filled with the new wine of God's grace. And this new wine couldn't be contained by the old wineskins of the past.**

**This was something different. This was the cup of the new covenant, the blood of Christ, shed for many for the remission of sins.**

**When we take the Lord's Supper, we don't drink enough wine to get drunk. In fact in the Presbyterian Church we don't even drink wine at all. We just drink a sip of grape juice. It all seems very tame. We Presbyterians are the people who love doing everything "decently and in order."**

**But, today's lesson teaches us that sometimes, by the power of God's Spirit, decency and order go out the window. Sometimes the joy spills over into the streets. Sometimes we are intoxicated by God's dream, and everything changes in a wild and wonderful way.**

**It is possible that we Christians are a little too sober at times. We take ourselves too seriously, and that means that we are sometimes not open to the surprising, intoxicating power of the Spirit.**

**When officers are ordained in the Presbyterian Church we promise to serve the people with "energy, intelligence and imagination." Today's lesson emphasizes that last trait, imagination. God through the power of the Spirit asks us to imagine a world that is different. And in the final analysis the power of imagination might be the greatest power of all.**

**The Spirit of God breathes new life into us, the old passes away, and we become like new creations.**

#### **LAKEVIEW PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**The Presbyterian News service told the story of a church in New Orleans, Lakeview Presbyterian that was changed for the worse. An ill wind by the name of hurricane Katrina blew their way. And when Lake Pontchartrain overflowed the church and the neighborhood were flooded with about eight feet of water.**

**Insurance and long years of hard work eventually restored the church, but the neighborhood was changed beyond restoration. Many people refused to come back after the storm, and the church that had 335 members before the storm now has lost 60 percent of its membership.**

**But, the ill wind of Katrina was no match for the power of God's Spirit. The Holy Wind has in many ways renewed and restored their ministry in some surprising ways.**

**The members who stayed have a new sense of mission and hope. They have focused more on community outreach and ministry to the poor. They have begun to share their building with a Korean Presbyterian Church. Young adult volunteers from all over the country have brought a new sense of vitality to their Sunday school.**

**Funds from the Birthday Offering of the Presbyterian Women enabled the church to renovate and restore a building that once again houses 70 children in a weekday preschool.**

**Amelie Wellman, an administrative assistant at the church said that she sees how in some ways they are much stronger after Katrina than before the storm. She wrote that before the storm she thought that it was time for her to move on. But, though her job is much harder now, she is certain that now she's doing what God wants her to do.**

**She concluded, "I feel strongly that God didn't bring us this far to let us go."**

## **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

**I think that might be a good way to answer the question that serves as the title to our sermon. What does this mean? What is this strange story of Pentecost all about?**

**It means that God didn't bring us this far to let us go. It means that God is still reaching out to all people, everywhere. It means that God is still reaching out to you and me this very day. It means that even in the worst of times everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. (Acts 2:21)**

**I guess you do have to be a little intoxicated in the Spirit to believe that. But, that's what we believe because we have seen it with our own eyes. The power of God's Spirit can change everything.**

**It has happened before, and it will happen again. May God make us receptive to his Spirit of salvation and truth.**

**Amen.**