

Acts 2:1-21

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.”

Acts 2:14 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.’

ABSENT THAT SUNDAY

We don’t do church meetings like they used to do we? In today’s lesson from Scripture we see just how much things have changed.

2

There is a great wind from heaven that brings the whole neighborhood into the street.
There are fire-like tongues from heaven that alight on the disciples.

And then these rubes from the country start speaking in foreign languages without even having the help of Rosetta Stone software.

This odd occurrence marks the beginning of the church. We've heard the story so many times that we sometimes are numb to just how amazing the story really is. If only we could have ears to hear this story afresh.

Preaching professor Tom Long tells about the time he was teaching a confirmation class, and they were learning about the church year. He asked,

“Who knows what happened at Pentecost?” No one knew so Tom went on to say, “Pentecost was when the church was all together, fire and wind came from heaven and the disciples spoke in languages that they did not know.”

One little girl got all wide-eyed and said,
“Gosh Rev. Long, I must have been absent that Sunday.”

Most of us are like that little girl. We were absent that Sunday. We have a hard time relating to this story.

The church in the power of the Spirit seems very foreign to us. The main thing I relate to in this story is the question that the people asked when they first experienced this power, “What does this mean?”

What does this story mean?

PENTECOST VERSUS PRESBYTERIANS

A church like this church needs crash helmets and seatbelts, not the bulletins and polite smiles that we pass out. We Presbyterians do everything decently and in order.

We're people who need seven committee meeting before we decide to move the flower stands to a new location! We surely don't want this kind of disorder in our worship.

Actually, Pentecost began as a very decent and orderly festival. It was one of oldest feasts of the Jewish religion. That's why there were people from all over the world in Jerusalem. They came to celebrate the gift of the Pentateuch, the first and oldest Scriptures in the Bible.

I wonder what kind of folks gathered to celebrate Pentecost that day. They had geographical diversity going for them. They were from all over the ancient world. And yet I wonder if they weren't in many ways very much the same.

I imagine a gathering of senior citizens settled in for a meeting much like last year's meeting, a historical commemoration for a religion that abhors change.

I know what that's like.

When I went to General Assembly we had folks from all over the country. But, though we were from different places and from different circumstances we were very much alike.

Almost all of us were "upper" middle-aged folks (okay we were senior citizens by and large) who all knew how to speak that special Presbyterian language. (I think they call it Presbyterian—ese.) They tried to liven us up with modern music and fancy liturgy led by drum playing Native Americans.

But, no matter how hard we tried, we still looked like who we were: middle class, senior citizens who had come for a church conference. Even our casual dress could not disguise the fact that we were the stiff-necked, starched shirt crowd.

And the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit fell upon a group just like this.

PRESBYTERIANS INTERRUPTED

Can you imagine that? Senior citizens from all over the world settled in to do business as usual. They were ready to plod through the program, doing things this year just like they did it last year and the year before.

And upon this decent and orderly group a rushing wind, a holy fire descends. And to top it all off, people who weren't even invited to the assembly start babbling about what God has been doing in their lives.

It's enough to give the Stated Clerk white hair!

Actually, God's Spirit has been giving his people white hair for a long time. Just ask Moses.

And now this God is interrupting the lives of His people once more.

Jesus said that it would happen.

Jesus promised us before he left us that he would send us the Holy Spirit. Jesus would be with us in the Spirit, empowering us in a dynamic and somewhat disturbing way.

4

Presbytery decided this past week to do a new church development in Lake Nona. Nancy Ogne will be the organizing pastor and wrote with excitement on Facebook about the Presbytery's action. In her conclusion she wrote something like,

“Come Lord Jesus. Fasten you seatbelts.”

I like that.

So many church folks mistakenly think that we're in control. We promote that illusion of control with all our religious rules and regulations. We think that we can “win” by making sure our view of the “truth” prevails.

It doesn't work that way.

Jesus still has some surprises in store for us. The Spirit of Jesus still comes upon us and speaks to us in surprising and disrupting ways. The Spirit of the Risen Lord falls on us and changes us. The Spirit of the Risen Lord causes us to view old Scripture in new ways.

PENTECOST AND PRESBYTERIANS

In fact, it's because of Pentecost that I'm a Presbyterian.

Oh, I know. Charismatic and Presbyterian do not seem to go together. But, we are charismatic in this way; we insist upon waiting upon the Spirit above everything else.

Like those religious people of old we too have our rulebook. It's called the Book of Order. It's thick. It's imposing. It has an odd numbering system.

It is so mysteriously obtuse that we have to hire someone like me to make rulings and lead people to the Promised Land of understanding. (That's what I do in my spare time.)

And recently we even voted to change our form of government in a significant way. There has been much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

People are worried that no one will know what we are doing. That may be true, but it's not the fault of our new Form of Government. The new Form of Government (or NFOG as we like to affectionately call it) is actually simpler, more flexible and easier to use.

If you promise not to tell anyone, I'll let you in on a secret. The basic idea behind our form of government has always been very simple. You only need to know two things.

First (and this is first in the Form of Government, both the old FOG and the new FOG) Jesus Christ is Head of the Church.

The head of the church is not the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly. (Oddly enough the Stated Clerk is the highest office in our church. It sounds like someone who should be in the mailroom!) But, the head of the church is not that person. Nor is the head of the church the pastor. The head of the church is not the executive presbyter.

The head of the church is Jesus Christ.

And the second thing your need to know is that “God alone is Lord of the conscience.”

In other words we should be committed to what we believe. We should be able to justify what we believe by citing Scripture and our religious tradition.

But, we need to leave room for people who disagree with us because we could be wrong.

We are not the Head of the Church. Our views, no matter how passionate we are about them, are not set in stone. There are people in the church who study the Bible and are committed to the faith and yet sometimes come up with ideas that are quite different from what we believe.

Now that doesn't mean we accept any old thing as God's will. Presbyterians meet together and seek God's will, much as was done in the early church. We vote on it.

If we change our understanding of Scripture as expressed in our statements of faith (something we call the Confessions) then we require a two-thirds vote of all the regional governing bodies of the church. (By the way for those of you who keep up with all things Presbyterian, a possible new Confession, the Belhar Confession from South Africa failed to live up to that high standard.)

Changes to our rulebook, the Book of Order can be made by a majority of our commissioners voting to make a particular change. But, all of those changes are just one voting cycle away from being changed.

Why? Because we think that human beings make mistakes. And sometimes what we think is the will of God is not the will of God.

GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS

There's a good example of that in chapter one of the book of Acts, the chapter that precedes our lesson for today. The risen Christ is about to ascend into heaven, and do you know what the disciples ask him? “Lord, is now the time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

In other words, “Lord, now is the time that you'll send down fire and roast those Romans who have taken over our country?”

6

The disciples still didn't get it. Their view of the kingdom was distorted by their culture and their own desires.

Jesus said, "Don't worry about that. Just wait for the coming of my Spirit in Jerusalem." And with that Jesus ascended into heaven.

So, did they do what Jesus asked? No.

It took the scolding of two angels to get them to go back to Jerusalem. And when they were back in Jerusalem, did they pray and wait for the coming of the Spirit? No. They decided to elect a new "Apostle" to replace Judas by casting lots.

In my opinion this is the mistake that the church often makes. We think that truth can be found through what we do and say. If our side "wins" in the church courts, then God's will is done.

But, this election of Matthias as the "new" 12th disciple suggests that until the Spirit comes upon us and helps us understand the Scripture and what God wants us to do, the actions we take are pretty insignificant.

You won't hear the name of Matthias mentioned ever again in Scripture. (I think there's a reason for that. The person God had in mind to be the 12th Apostle was not Matthias but Paul. We see how that story developed in the rest of the book of Acts and in the letters of Paul.)

A NEW THING

Instead of holding an election or a festival that affirmed the old ways of doing things, at Pentecost God did something new. God sent fire and wind from heaven, and when the people asked, "What in the world is going on?" The Apostles preached the word of Scripture in a new way.

They quoted the prophet Joel, an apocalyptic passage that many thought was about the time when God would restore the kingdom to Israel. (Later on people would use passages like this to talk about the end of the world.)

But, that's not how the Apostles were led by the Spirit to interpret this passage. By saying that Pentecost was a fulfillment of the prophet Joel, the Apostles were saying that the kingdom does not rely upon what we can do nor is the kingdom relegated to a far off time.

The kingdom comes here and now when the Spirit of God inspires ordinary men and women to preach the Word in a new way. Old men and women will dream dreams. Young men and women will prophesy. And sometimes the word of truth will come from people who have been marginalized by society, like slaves, both men and women. (See Acts 2:17-18)

This is a really amazing rediscovery of God's will, and it absolutely transformed how faith was practiced in the early church.

Slaves and women became leaders in the church. Former masters became believers in churches in which former slaves were leaders. They loved each other. They shared their life and their possessions with fellow believers.

The world was amazed. And many of those outsiders became believers.

Were there disagreements in this Spirit empowered community? You bet there were.

In the New Testament we read about conflict over doctrine. We read about conflict over the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. We read about conflict over ethics.

We read about conflict over the practice of worship and who is qualified to be a leader in the church. (Does any of that sound familiar to you?)

Sometimes the conflicts were so great that long time friends parted ways and started their own ministry in another place. (See Acts 15:39) And even though this was very painful we see that in many cases God used these disagreements among friends to multiply ministry and sharpen their understanding of what God wanted them to do.

Now, admittedly this is not an easy path to follow. It would be much more comfortable and comforting to believe that our ways are always God's ways.

But, that's simply not true.

In fact the ministry of Jesus teaches us that people who are very serious about Scripture and the faith can be very wrong about what God is doing in the world.

For example, in the passage that follows our passage for today Peter confronts the crowd at Pentecost with the fact that they crucified God's own Son. That was not an easy sermon to hear, but it brought forgiveness and redemption.

The rest of the book of Acts is the story of how through good times and bad God led his Apostles on an amazing journey of faith.

The journey continues. And we are invited to join in this journey of faith.

8

Come Lord Jesus! That's what the early church said, and that's what we say too.

But, the heavenly pilot warns those of us who make the journey,

“There may be some turbulence ahead. A holy wind is blowing. Please, fasten your seatbelts!”

Amen.