

What Does This Mean?

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

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.’

If I close my eyes, I can still feel the heat of the massive tent meeting, smell the dirt and sawdust as they crunched together on the floor. I can see the preacher, sweating profusely as he walked up and down the center aisle; his language peppered with images of eternal consequences; pearly gates or fiery lakes; golden mansions or everlasting torment; loud hosannas or deafening wails.

I can sense the shuddering shoulders as they ponder the contrasting images. I recall that when the altar call was made, dozens flooded to the front to secure their salvation.

There were lots of tears and folks with raised hands, people weeping, speaking in tongues, and falling over in their metal folding chairs and down near the pulpit.

It was a revival in my hometown, in the evangelical tradition in which I was raised. It was loud, and hot, and confusing, and seemed to me to be unpredictable and questionably holy chaos.

I was eight years old, and it was all enough to scare the hell out of me; theologically speaking of course.

It felt that way to the crowd that day, all those years ago, in the Holy City. It was terrifying; beholding those loud Jewish voices speak to all of the foreign visitors in their own native tongues, without a hint of an accent, wildly uttering on about some person named Jesus. The scene could be perceived as pure madness, bedlam, pandemonium.

I like to call this text, *The story that drove the Presbyterians away*. It's a bizarre scripture. Nothing decent or orderly about it.

The setting that day was the Jewish celebration of the Feast of Weeks, or Shavuot/Pentecost, as it came to be called. The third of the three great festivals of Judaism.

Shavuot was a joyous festival, in which the first fruits of the harvest would have been given to God. Luke's first readers would have been reminded of Jesus' declaration that the "harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few."

More importantly, the feast was a celebration of the giving of the Torah, in particular the Ten Commandments, from Sinai. Luke wants us to make the connection that this is the start of something, the beginning of something new.

And so it was that "they were all together in one place." The *all* being the entire Christian community at the time, numbering around 120 persons. Including men and women, the Apostles of Jesus, and many unnamed, faithful followers.

As the folks were worshipping up there, there was a noise so loud it couldn't be ignored. One theologian writes, "So startled were they that they lost control of themselves—their sensory systems were flooded with adrenaline so that their minds and bodies processed intensely the sound, energy, and feeling of the coming of the Holy Spirit."¹

Before any of the disciples could begin to defend themselves, the wind swept in, striking what felt like sparks on each of their heads as it blew through.

The sparks ignited flames and as they breathed out, after holding their breath in fear of it all, what came out of their mouths was just as fantastical; words in languages they didn't even know they knew. And not just the blubbering of religious ecstasy, but real words from real tongues across the known world.

¹ Linda E. Thomas, *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Edited by David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Year C vol. 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 14.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes the scene by writing, “Like a room full of bagpipes all going at once, they set up such a racket that they drew a crowd. People from all over the world who were in Jerusalem for the festival came leaning in the windows and pushing through the doors, surprised to hear someone speaking their own language so far from home.”²

Taylor goes on, “Parthians stuck their heads through the door expecting to see other Parthians, and Libyans looked around for other Libyans, but what they saw instead were a bunch of Galileans—rural types from northern Israel dressed in the equivalent of first century overalls—all of them going on and on about God’s mighty acts like a bunch of Ph.D.’s in middle eastern languages.”

The text says, “And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘what does this mean?’” Remember that the folks who had come to Jerusalem came from across the known world.

As subjects of Rome, many of them would have spoken Greek, the language of the Roman military and of commerce. They would have also been multilingual, speaking the language of their natal lands also.

The Spirited-filled disciples speak in the native tongues of these immigrant peoples, and they tell of the glories of God, not in the language of the empire but in the languages of the people subject to empire. They are the voice of the oppressed.

And these voices which echo God’s praise cannot be silenced or even ignored. They keep on singing and declaring and rejoicing. They keep inviting folks in, to hear their own names in God’s story. They are themselves swept up.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999) p. 145.

It seems the only way to seek God's anointed wind is to simply pray for it, in the language used in prayers and songs down through the centuries. "Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove" the old hymn says. You'll notice today we aren't singing that hymn. I considered the proposal too risky.

This whole idea of the Holy Spirit is dangerous, if you ask me. Across the biblical witness, we can see how the Spirit disturbs and confronts and realigns things.

In the beginning, the Spirit hovers over creation, swirling water and wind into mountains and seas. In the words of the prophets, the Spirit falls on their shoulders like a mantle, giving them courage and boldness to speak at the risk of everything.

It settles as well upon a certain rabbi who speaks good news to the poor and release to the captive, and sends him to an early grave. It seems to come often enough, to challenge our claims on what constitutes the mind and will of God. And I'm not sure I'm ready for all that. Are you?

Yet even Jesus is murky on what the Spirit is. He tells Nicodemus in John's Gospel, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Now who needs that? That sounds like hippie-dippie nonsense to me.

John Calvin noted, "All the principles of piety [are] undermined by fanatics who substitute revelations for Scripture."³ I'm with John on that one. I am a Calvinist. Proudly so. As I suspect are most of you. We like the predictability of our common rituals and the sequential order of our worship.

Alongside that, our theology is also logical in many ways. It can be followed. We believe it is grounded in the biblical witness, just as our worship is reflective of the methodical practices observed by the Israelites at the

³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (London: James Clark and Co. Ltd, 1953) p. 84.

Temple. We don't care much for chaos or spontaneity. We leave that to other traditions, thank you very much.

I had one of our members here tell me once, "When I visit another church, I base my comfort level on how many hands go up during a worship song measured against the number of congregants. The higher the ratio of hand-raising, the higher my anxiety raises."

Of course you know that old story, the one about the visitor who comes to worship at the local Presbyterian Church. As the minister begins to preach, the man about half-way back in the nave begins to shout every time the minister makes a point with which he agrees.

"Yes, Lord!" He shouts. "Glory!" He declares at other points. After about five minutes of this, an usher quietly approaches him.

"Sir, can I help you with something?" "I'm sorry," the visitor responds, "I can't help it. I've got the Spirit!"

To which the usher quickly replies, "Well you didn't get it here."

What happened that day in Jerusalem? What does it mean? What do the ecstatic utterances of a handful of scared disciples in an upper room in Israel 2,000 years ago have to do with the 21st century church?

If I'm being honest: Everything.

The outpouring of the Spirit of the Living God on a bunch of bumbling believers has everything to do with how the Spirit still works today. Whether we like it or not.

Pentecost is not just for other Christian traditions, this is our heritage as well. God's holy wind blows where it chooses to, often illuminating the Scriptures to reveal what may have been hidden in plain sight before. And we might not care for the places it pushes us. Or the demands it places on us.

To welcome the stranger? Not today, Lord. I'm busy. Plus they could be a terrorist. To hear the voices of people long silenced? That sounds hazardous. Let someone else do that. To unmask idolatries in church and culture? No thank you, Dear Lord. We're *winning* again as Americans. Can't you see that?

To forgive others? Jesus, don't you realize how long I've held this grudge? Don't you know how I've tended to my grudge; fed it, watered it, kept it alive so I will never forget the wrong this person did to me? And now you want me to forgive them? Ah.

The thing about a fierce wind is though, the longer it blows, the less anything can really stand in its way. Being from Indiana, I've witnessed countless tornadoes, or what insurance companies call "acts of God" decimate farms and homes and entire towns.

The wind just keeps right on blowing. It doesn't check to see if anyone was ready for it, or if they liked the direction it was moving.

We can either get out of the way, or be carried up into it.

Our Reformed theology has it right: God is sovereign, and we are not. Which means even on our best-intentioned of days, we will never fully understand the will or mind of the Creator.

We must simply trust that when it comes, the quiet, or at times deafening roar, of this holy wind will push us into the very heart of God's own concerns for the world through the hope of Jesus Christ.

Come, Holy Spirit? Be careful what you ask for.