

## Acts 2:1-21

In confirmation last week we were talking about the Pentecost story and why the symbols of fire and wind belong to Pentecost. Josh pointed out that those are actually kind of terrifying things, not cuddly and safe-feeling, and I realized, he's right. Pentecost symbols are terrifying! Which led me in a whole new direction.

Pentecost has a lot of layers. Originally it was a harvest festival, mandated by Leviticus 23, which says,

And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation-offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. ***You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord.***

Leviticus goes on to give excruciatingly detailed instructions about the offerings, but then wraps up by reminding everybody that they were once poor and hungry, and God gave them this farm land, so they'd better provide for the poor by not harvesting too thoroughly so people can go over their fields or vineyards and gather what they need. So the original Pentecost celebration moves from gratitude for harvest to provision for the rest of the community.

Later Pentecost was associated with the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, which is another kind of bounty from God.

On this day of Pentecost, however, there is the rush of a *violent* wind, and tongues of fire rest upon each head. It sounds more like a wildfire than a religious holiday. These symbols do not correspond to harvest or to Torah. They're something completely new and unsettling. And they lead the disciples to go out and do something completely unreasonable and foolish, which is to speak to people they don't know in a crowded place.

We're meant to remember the story of the Tower of Babel from Genesis, when God's creation was going from bad to worse and God was starting to think about just wiping it all out with a flood and starting over. In that story, people all spoke the same language, so they were able to collaborate on building a tower to heaven that would "make a name for themselves." God put an end to that by causing them all to speak different languages. This time, the disciples do not speak some magic universal language; they speak in every language that's spoken on the face of the earth, not erasing differences but embracing and including them. And maybe that seems warm and fuzzy, but not so much: while many people are "amazed and perplexed," which isn't exactly a ringing endorsement, others are downright contemptuous, sneering that the disciples are just drunk.

So now we have loud wind, wildfire, and lots of strangers laughing at us. What could be more festive?

Well, here's the thing: What if the work of the Holy Spirit *is* that unfamiliar and powerful? What if the Spirit blows through our communities in ways that feel like difficult upheavals, but are ways that Spirit drives us to new work, new communities, even new callings? What if we're right to be scared, amazed, and perplexed?

Peter responds to the skeptics by quoting the prophet Joel:

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.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

Joel didn't say that God was working to settle things down. He implied that the sign of God's

presence would be prophecies, visions, dreams—divine communications that were startling, that required an effort to understand, that maybe contradicted settled conventional wisdom. And he also said that those communications would be relayed by people from outside the mainstream: the elderly and the young and slaves.

You have to admit, this has the ring of authenticity. This is totally on-brand for God, calling for *not* the usual suspects to be listened to, and leading all of us to do things that invite a certain amount of ridicule. Barbara Lundblad tells about a clergy friend of hers whose church did a big capital campaign and dug right in and started building, and then ran out of money before they could build the sanctuary. What kind of dinguses do that? Well, apparently they had started with the fellowship hall, and they built some sleeping space for unhoused people, and then they decided to put in showers, and then they had to put in washing machines and dryers, and of course a kitchen . . . what with one thing and another, they just got overexcited about ministry, and I guess they had to worship in the fellowship hall. Which probably worked just fine. But I bet the other people in town laughed behind their backs.

When Pentecost rolls around, it reminds us to expect the unexpected. It explicitly reminds us to listen to young people, who are going to reflect back at us what they've learned from us, both good and bad, *and* bring some very original thoughts and ways of being. As we've seen, Josh is very much of a literary turn of mind. That is, he immediately reads stories on more than one level, and he sees themes and connections between stories that kind of crack them open in new ways. (It kind of runs in the family.) I have an extra credit assignment in my World Religions class, in which I ask the student to create an interfaith space for DMACC. This year was the first year I made that assignment, and it was just startling to see what students

came up with, what they thought was important, how they approached it. It makes me think now, oh, if we had another month of confirmation, how fun would it be to get *Josh* to design a whole new church? These are the kind of new sparks God is lighting up among us.

I was going to keep this short, because we have so much going on today. But let me wrap up with this: last week when Josh said that the mighty wind and tongues of flame were terrifying, I realized that this is another example of why it is that every time God sends an angel to speak with someone, the first thing the angel has to say is “Fear not.” Because of course when a messenger of God appears, it’s terrifying. And it should be. Pentecost should be terrifying. But the angel always has good news, if the listener is willing to be brave or look like a fool or both. On Pentecost, the disciples found themselves able to speak a hundred languages out in a public place, *because* God’s Holy Spirit was with them. What commotion might the Holy Spirit want to cause through us?

God of Spirit,

We give thanks that when you sent your Advocate, the apostles were empowered to speak about your deeds of power in all languages, for every people. Give us boldness to share the Spirit’s power with our neighbors. Amen.