

Sunday, May 31, 2020

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Acts 2:1-21

***What Does This Mean?***

**INTRODUCTION:**

Today is Pentecost Sunday, a day set aside on the Christian calendar that marks the end of Easter tide. Pentecost celebrates the reception of the Holy Spirit, that mystical organizing principle that gave birth to the church. The Holy Spirit is like that mysterious energy in dark matter; pure, invisible energy that permeates the cosmos and accounts for 85% of all matter.

When the Holy Spirit dramatically descends, she brings a sense of unity and purpose to a diverse group of people. That is why I thought it would be good to call in the church to read this story. I reached out to a number of people last week to read today and they ALL said yes! (I love how we are a church of "yes".)

Hear this epic story of the birth of the church, found in the Book of Acts, Chapter 2. They are reading from a paraphrased translation of the Bible called, *The Message*.

This is the story of Pentecost.

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**SCRIPTURE: Acts 2:1-21**

When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?"

Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: "What's going on here?"

Others joked, "They're drunk on cheap wine."

That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency:

"Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk —it's only nine o'clock in the morning! This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen:

"In the Last Days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams.

When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit on all who serve me, and they WILL prophesy. Before the tremendous and marvelous Day of the Lord arrives, I'll set wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billowing smoke, the sun turning black and the moon blood-red, and whoever calls out to God for help will be saved."

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*Ever-present God, Your ways are always surprising and unexpected. You bring order to chaos and new life from the ashes. Set your Holy Spirit upon us this morning. In this time of confusion and disorientation, may Your Word give us insight, understanding and hope. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to You, our rock and our redeemer. AMEN*

Against the dystopian backdrop of our current reality, Scripture is reading differently. I've read this story countless times over many years, but this week, the first thing that hit me was, "*they were all together in one place.*" In a sense, the followers of Jesus were quarantined together. Day after day goes by as they hang about holding vigil and trying to make sense of what they had witnessed. Who would believe them? If they said anything, would they be killed too? Day after day, in isolation, their fear compounded. There was a growing sense of foreboding as if Roman soldiers would break down the door and arrest them at any moment. For 50 days they waited in confusion, terrified and grieving. They were powerless to make sense of what happened and increasingly anxious about their future.

This rag-tag band of disciples, without a leader, have no clue what to do. The way I see it, we are in an alarmingly similar situation today, so what else might be here that can help us navigate our way forward?

To begin with, we see that they looked toward the traditions they already knew. they were all gathered together in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival called *Shavuot*, a harvest festival that comes 50 days after Passover. They were practicing what their tradition had taught them. So, we find Peter and the rest sitting around the Torah scroll in deep study

and discussion. I imagine they were seeking comfort and understanding in doing what they have always done. They longed for that sense of unity and purpose they felt with Jesus these past years, so naturally practicing the tradition was a good start, but just not the same.

This particular pilgrimage festival brought thousands of Jews from across the land to celebrate. Just outside the doors, The Jerusalem streets were overflowing with pilgrims from all corners of the known earth. And that's when it happened.

Some kind of metaphysical seam burst. The fabric of reality was torn open.

The scene is spectacular and chaotic: a violent, rushing sound like wind, and then "divided tongues, as of fire" - not a fire that destroys, but more like the fire that Moses encountered at the burning bush, which was "blazing, yet it was not consumed" (Exodus 3:1-2).

In an instant the room is filled up with such energy that the very air around seems to be igniting with little tongues of flame flickering first here then there. The crowd outside in the streets overhears this great racket these Galilean's were making. They were speaking so passionately and emphatically in languages they should not be able to speak, yet clearly, they spoke about God's deeds of power. We are told "*All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"*"

Indeed, that is the question for us today as our understanding of church and reality has been rocked at the foundations.

What does this mean?

What we learn from the story of Pentecost is that from the very center of chaos and confusion there suddenly comes a profound sense of unity! Unified in the Holy Spirit of God the disciples begin to set in motion what would turn out to be a radical new understanding God, across all boundaries and divides.

Filled with the Spirit, they were being transformed into a community that was to be defined not by the structures they put in place to give stability to their lives but by the wild, fierce and sometimes terrifying possibility that life in the Spirit brings.

Later in the book of Acts we read that these followers of Jesus went on to form a new community "*that had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.*" (Acts 2:44-47).

Against their dystopian backdrop, this uneducated, poor little rag tag bunch of followers of Jesus became living witness to the power of God, not through their own ability but through the spirit of God flowing through them -- recreating them and their life together in startling new ways. The Spirit power was manifest in the healing of what was broken, harmony where there was once discord and mutual blessing across all boundaries. This is God's desire for "every kind of people" and all creation. This is GOD's dream for US!

Like those disciples in the first century, AND also like those that lived at the time of Martin Luther's reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, I believe that we too are living on the

hinge of another great shift in the Church. We are living in the midst of a time of great transformation – a NEW reformation. What it looks like to live together, work together, and worship together is completely changing.

I believe that the way we live together is being transformed and re-created with a greater awareness to build a sense of well-being and compassion into the very structures of our communities. We are innovating new opportunities for social interaction and exchange that builds bonds of relationship. Our life together, as people of faith, is being transformed and re-created to emphasize and legitimize our experience, value open dialog, and express our faith in action. Orthodox belief, religious certainty and church structures are openly & honestly being questioned.

By the power of this Holy Spirit we are invited to be participants in the innovation of something new. In a time of pandemic and social distancing, we are finding that the church is not a building or an exclusive membership. The Church is not even a gathering place where we come together.

At the heart of the church is God's mission to love our neighbors as ourselves. And the adventure continues!

The dramatic story of Pentecost is only the beginning: throughout the Book of Acts, again and again, the Spirit mobilizes the church and opens up new horizons for ministry. The Holy Spirit of God always breathes new life - and new life means new growth, change, and ongoing development.

The Spirit protects us, but also challenges us, provoking and pushing us along to the next thing.

And here at TriCon Church, I feel the power of the Spirit stirring. Even now I see an even wider opening to an exciting next chapter in our life together. It is not our budget, building or membership numbers, it is the power of the Spirit in this place. It is the Holy Spirit that is woven into the warmth and embrace of this community, in our passion for justice, in our courage to ask hard questions, and an open invitation to enter into this uncertainty and doubt with hope for a future.

It is in you, TriCon Church, as you live with compassion for others and offer comfort, hope and healing out to our beautiful but terribly wounded world.

As you enter into these summer months, may you experience more of God's presence. May you feel God pouring out the Holy Spirit over your heads and your thoughts and the words of your lips, over your hearts and your feelings and emotions and your compassion for all others. May you feel God pouring out the Holy Spirit over your hands and your feet as you put into action all that God commands you. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the wild, untamed love of God, in unity with the Holy Spirit be with each of you.

AMEN!