



“A Language They Can Understand”
Scripture – Acts 2:1-21
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, June 4, 2017

Whenever church leaders get together for conferences or regional meetings, conversation seems to drift to a well-worn topic: the future of the church.

How do we ensure the viability of our congregations? What will the church look like in ten years? How do we respond to an ever-shifting religious landscape?

Usually this topic provokes anxiety, especially among people who have been in the church long enough to see numbers dwindle and budgets tighten. The reports from social scientists and media outlets don't help: You've seen the headlines: “Mainline Protestants Make Up Shrinking Number of U.S. Adults.” “Religious ‘Nones’ on the Rise” (That's N-O-N-E-S ... Not the Catholic sisters who wear black and white habits)!

What always surprises me about these conversations is that they rarely find hope in stories of the Spirit at work in and through the church, but focus on metrics that belong more to the world of marketing than to the Kingdom of God.

But, this observation does not mean the anxiety is any less real. It seems always to lurk beneath the surface, even of congregations that are vibrant and healthy and faithful (and – for the record – I would put Westminster in that category). Many of us are bewildered that more people are not drawn to the church we love so deeply, and to the Gospel that has transformed our lives. Many of us mourn the church that once was, or feel powerless in the face of national trends toward the secular. Perhaps we are waiting for the Spirit to guide us into this uncertain future, and to birth new life in our midst.

We know something of what those first disciples must have been feeling as they gathered in Jerusalem following Christ's ascension into heaven.

This is where our story begins: *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.* And then – suddenly – the Spirit bursts on the scene. There's a violent wind, and tongues of flame, and the babble sounds of a newborn church ... It all happens so fast! It's easy to forget the disciples have been waiting for this moment ...

They have been waiting in grief, for they have said ‘farewell’ to their teacher and friend. Jesus has ascended to heaven, to abide with God the Father. So now, the disciples (presumably) *descend* into mourning, wondering how on earth their Lord will fulfill his mission now that he no longer *dwells* on earth.

Christ's followers have been waiting in anticipation, trying to imagine what their ministry will look like in Jesus' absence ... at least, his *physical* absence. They know what Jesus expects of them; he made it very clear in his parting words: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8b). But how will they manage? They've never done *anything* without Jesus telling them what to do, holding their hand along the way. So they bide their time, taking solace in fellowship and prayer as they watch for their sign to launch. So they – this leaderless community – have also been waiting in hope.

Before Jesus was carried into heaven, he assured his followers that he would not abandon them, and ordered them to return to Jerusalem to wait for the promise of the Father. "John baptized with water," he'd told them, "but you ... *you* will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:5).

So, yes ... When the day of Pentecost had come, they *were* all together in one place – the band of disciples, along with "certain women" who had followed Jesus ... about 120 in all (according to the first chapter of Acts). We can assume this community of believers has been together in one place for *ten* days – gazing toward heaven with expectant eyes, jumping in anticipation each time the wind rustled the curtains or the door creaked on its hinges. For this anxious community, the Holy Spirit's arrival was the culmination of days of waiting – of hours spent trusting ... hoping that God would – once again – prove faithful. Of course, the Lord does prove faithful ... Otherwise, we wouldn't have much to celebrate on Pentecost.

Still, the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit on that festival day must have startled even the most vigilant disciple. Who could have predicted the rush of wind, swirling around astonished apostles to fill every nook and cranny of that house? Or the flashes of fire that neither burned nor consumed, but which – nevertheless – ignited something within disciples eager to tell the story. Who could have predicted this chaotic culmination, by which the Spirit of God swept in with unbridled power to *empower* this waiting community to proclaim the good news?

It fascinates me that the sign of the Holy Spirit's presence within this fledgling church is not a showcase of miracles; these disciples don't heal the sick with a gentle touch, or feed the masses with five loaves and two fish, or perform the other signs and wonders we witnessed during Jesus' ministry ... at least not on this *particular* day. Rather, the mark of the Spirit's presence among them is the gift of language – the surprising ability to speak in tongues so that people of every land might *hear* and *believe* the good news! On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes in rush of wind and tongues of fire to equip the saints for one task: to tell the story.

To tell the story in the languages of Cappadocia and Egypt and Libya and Rome. To carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. Jesus has called them to this work. And now, having been baptized by the Spirit, they have the tools to be Christ's witnesses throughout the world. The Holy Spirit has ushered this anxious community into God's future – a future where daughters prophecy and old men dream dreams ... a future where *all* people (no matter their gender, or age, or status) are invited to bear witness to the transformative power of God.

Already we see this future breaking into the present. As soon as these Spirit-filled disciples begin speaking in other languages, a diverse crowd gathers ... surprised to hear the familiar sounds of their mother tongues echoing from a house in Jerusalem. These people – Parthians, and Arabs, and Elamites, and residents of every Mediterranean land – are amazed and bewildered to hear tales of God's deeds in words they can understand! "What could this possibly mean?" they wonder! Of course, there are skeptics among them (there will always be skeptics when the Gospel is involved). But Peter begins to tell the story, and – soon – lives are transformed.

By the end of the second chapter of Acts, thousands believe the good news. They hear in their own language: "That the promise is for [them], for [their] children, and for all who are far away ..." (Acts 2:39). And they commit themselves to the way of Christ. The Spirit inspires this diverse and growing community to devote

themselves to study and prayer, and dedicate themselves to serving the poor. They share their possessions as any has need and they break bread together as one body in Christ (Acts 2:41-47). The Holy Spirit sets them free to love more fully, and – through their word and deed – the kingdom of God begins to come into view ... All because the Holy Spirit poured out power upon waiting disciples and equipped the church to be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth.

This is the good news of Pentecost: the Spirit draws the church into God’s redemptive work, so that others might hear the good news of Jesus Christ, and find their lives transformed. For that’s what happens when the Spirit shows up ... The church finds new life in its work and witness, and communities of unlikely disciples discover shared purpose in service; speakers of other languages find they have a place in the gospel story, and people with no hope for the future glimpse the Kingdom of God in their midst.

I don’t know about you, but I have never experienced the Spirit’s presence as a rush of violent wind, or as tongues of flame poised upon my shoulders. She’s always been more subtle ... like a gentle whisper in times of discernment or the gasp of recognition when confusion yields to clarity.

But the Holy Spirit still blows freely – stirring us to imagine new possibilities, breaking us free from anxiety and fear, and nudging us to take risks for the sake of the Gospel. The Spirit still rests upon waiting shoulders and empowers the saints for the work of ministry – even equipping us with languages we never imagined speaking.

Pastor Miriam, who serves a Presbyterian church in small-town Montana, tells a story of the Spirit doing just that ... of that unpredictable, holy Wind breathing new life and new purpose into a stagnant community of faith.¹ This was a church that – like so many others – had become preoccupied – not with the *wrong* things – but with things that, ultimately, did not matter to its witness. Some among them were feeling weary and worn; others were worse off ... feeling like there was no hope for the church.

But then, the Spirit – who always seems to blow where it will – empowered this community of faith to be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth ... or at least to the youth of northwest Montana. One day, a church member named Tom came to his fellow disciples with a request: “I’d like us to prepare meals for Serious Ju Ju, he said. “Serious *What?*” was their reply. But this community of faith stopped to listen ...

Serious Ju Ju is a skateboard ministry, of all things. It had become a refuge for youth with no place to go after school – kids whose parents did *not* call to check on them when they hadn’t turned up by midnight, kids who came from homes plagued by abuse of all kinds. Serious Ju Ju was a place of love and hospitality for the youth no one else seemed to want. But, when Tom first learned about Serious Ju Ju, they were on the verge of closing their doors. They couldn’t afford meals for all the kids who relied on this ministry for food; they couldn’t even afford the rent.

So, Tom turned to the church ... And this community of faith opened its doors to this community of skaters. They hosted them at the church once a month and let them use their parking lot to skate; then they helped Serious Ju Ju secure a new gathering place – a warehouse where they come to skate every Friday night. The church prepares a meal and breaks bread with these kids, and then sends them home with a bag of groceries to ensure they’ll have enough food to get through the weekend.

This unsuspecting community of faith has become passionate about Serious Ju Ju; one church member quilted blankets for the kids who hop from couch-to-couch because they don’t have a stable home; eighty-year old Presbyterian Women spend their Friday nights cheering on skaters; the elderly woman who coordinates meals for

¹ The Rev. Miriam Mauritzen, Ignite Presentation at 2016 NEXT Church National Gathering, <https://nextchurch.net/2016-national-gathering-ignite-miriam-mauritzen/>

this ministry has come to see Serious Ju Ju as her family. And – through the church’s witness – kids whom no one seemed to want have come to hear and believe the good news in a language they can understand – the language of home-cooked meals and hand-made blankets, of open doors and genuine hospitality, of fellowship that crosses dividing lines and love that knows no bounds.

The Holy Spirit swept over this church in small-town Montana – *not* in rush of wind or tongues of flame – but through a simple request from a fellow disciple. And this invitation freed this stagnant community of faith from preoccupation and hopelessness, and inspired them to embrace its calling to be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And, as always happens when the Spirit draws the church into God’s redemptive work, others came to believe that the promise of God was for them, and found their lives transformed. And like on the day of Pentecost, this church found new life in its work and witness, and communities of unlikely disciples discovered shared purpose in service. Like on the day of Pentecost, people with no hope for the future glimpsed the Kingdom of God in their midst.

The Holy Spirit is at work here too, and in every situation that leaves us feeling weary and worn, or downright hopeless. Ever faithful to the church, and to the world, the Spirit of God sweeps in to stir us to new possibilities, to free us from anxiety and fear, to nudge us to take risks for the sake of the Gospel, and to give us words to tell the story. Even here, even now, the Spirit whispers, it sighs, it beckons. How will you respond?

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Greg Jones

God of creation, energy that ignites the atom and power that propels the planets, we give you thanks for the breath of life. You create us in your image and present us with opportunities to live rich lives. As we gather at your table, make us mindful that we are never alone. Like the air we breathe, your Spirit surrounds us and fills us. When we feel defeated and ready to surrender, you shore up our strength. When the way forward seems uncertain and frightening, you illumine the path we should take. When we face struggles that appear too daunting, you bolster our courage and give us reason to keep forging ahead in hope.

Mighty God, in the beginning, when the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, your Spirit swept over the face of the waters. You spoke creation into being – the rich soil, the lush plants and trees, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, a multitude of animals roaming the land; and finally, the first human beings. You handed them the responsibility of caring for this amazing planet teeming with life, and that solemn duty has passed down through the generations.

When we work together to insure that the water and air are clean, we express our gratitude to you. When we pollute the air, fowl the water, and live as if the earth’s resources are for us alone, we show our disdain for future generations and our contempt for your gift.

Gracious God, You have given us the intelligence to discover the workings of the world and the interconnectedness of life. Help us to know deep in our souls that the earth is truly precious, and that you want us to enjoy it, but not destroy it. Help us to live thankfully, to choose wisely, and to show through our actions that we truly revere you and this amazing gift you give us.

Eternal God, your Spirit pulses through our veins saturating our souls with a hunger for love, a thirst for justice, and a desire for beauty. May we embrace the opportunities that come our way and serve you faithfully. Working alone, our contributions to the health of the planet seem insufficient, but working together we can make a lasting impact. Help us to fulfill our role as caretakers of the earth so that our children and our children’s children will be able to enjoy the wonders of your marvelous world. Amen.