



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Alert for God’s Spirit”

Scripture – Acts 2:1-21, 43-47

Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 20, 2018

Another week of broken hearts. In what feels like regularly scheduled school shootings, another community must bury their teenagers. It is sure to fire another round of debate over our nation’s love/hate relationship with guns.

Who can doubt we are living in divisive times? Lines of demarcation separate Red states and Blue states, Evangelicals and Progressives, Whites and Blacks, Trump supporters and Trump haters. Of course, the divisions are not confined to our own shores. There are the divisions between Radical Islam and the West, North Korea and the United States, Israelis and Palestinians, and the list drags on.

How can we live holy lives in unholy times? How can we live generous lives in selfish times?

Since the rise of consciousness, human beings have drawn lines between “us” and “them.” It was certainly prevalent in the Ancient world, and many would argue that the lines were actually starker back then, than they are today. At the time of Jesus, there were blunt distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and master, men and women. Today we read about an episode when people caught a glimpse of heaven – a riveting moment when the stubborn walls that usually separate and divide collapsed in a heap of dust.

Fifty days after Passover, Jews celebrated Pentecost. Originally it was a festival dedicated to the wheat harvest. According to tradition, the law was given on Mount Sinai to the Hebrew people 50 days after escaping from Egypt. Passover occurs about the same time as Easter, thus, Pentecost falls roughly 50 days after we celebrate the Resurrection.

According to the Book of Acts, the disciples – who were all faithful Jews – were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. Only seven weeks after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples’ heads were still spinning, but they were attempting to regain their bearings and figure out what next.

Thousands of Jews poured into Jerusalem each year for Pentecost. They came from lands near and far. They traveled from lands we now call Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Greece, Egypt, and Libya. Then, as now, more Jews lived outside of Palestine, than inside. So, each year, multitudes made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this holy celebration.

We read that the disciples of Jesus are together in a house when the wind of God blew into the room. God’s Spirit set the disciples on fire and each began to speak – not orderly, one after another, but simultaneously. The noise

spilled out onto the streets and passersby wondered what was creating such a ruckus and tried to see if they could decipher this cacophony.

At first, it sounded like gibberish. But then one who had traveled a great distance said, “Wait. These men are Galileans, but this one is speaking my language.” Someone from Libya, said, “That one over there is speaking my native tongue.” An Elamite spoke up, “I can understand this man.”

Most of the bystanders stood in awe, but one cynic quipped, “They’re all drunk! Filled with wine!”

The disciples were indeed filled; but not with wine. They were filled with something much more potent. God’s Spirit filled them with passion and courage – not the pseudo-courage that alcohol can prompt, but strength and boldness that God’s Spirit can inspire.

This event was critical for the spread of Christianity because it propelled the disciples out into the world with a divine mandate. Previously, they were insecure followers who often fell short of Jesus’ expectations. But after Pentecost, they became intrepid leaders determined to spread his message of love and justice and peace. And they were successful beyond anyone’s wildest dreams, planting seeds of faith, establishing churches, and launching a new faith that would eventually circle the globe.

What does Pentecost mean for us today? For one, it means is that while there are thin places – rare and wonderful spots where the curtain between heaven and earth is sheer – we can be touched by God’s Spirit anywhere, any time. Notice where the followers of Jesus were gathered on Pentecost. They were not in the Temple, not standing next to the Jordan River, not where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, not on Golgotha where he was crucified, and not at the tomb where Jesus rose from the dead. They were in some nondescript location in Jerusalem. The text simply says they were gathered in a house at nine o’clock in the morning. It is possible they were meditating on Scripture, but it is just as likely they were sipping tea.

That means that God’s Spirit may *touch* us, may *whisper* to us, may *challenge* us, may *inspire* us anywhere. We may bring higher expectations *here* in this sacred space and we may be more alert for God’s Spirit to break through to us in Scripture, prayer, preaching, or music. However, God’s Spirit may also be palpable when we share a meal with family or friends; when we put our child or grandchild to bed at night; when we strike up a real conversation with a refugee; when we sit with someone who is in pain; when we read words that stir our emotions; when we experience a piece of art; when we celebrate a special occasion; or even when we perform a simple mundane task.

If we have not shut the door on the possibility of God’s Spirit stirring us, and if we have not devised a mental construct that rigidly divides the sacred from the secular, the holy wind of God can blow through our lives transforming our mind or softening our heart or stiffening our resolve or arousing us to action. We might imagine that God is restricted to places we deem sacred, but God is present everywhere. We are the ones with blurry vision and poor hearing and closed minds that too often block our awareness of the divine Spirit in our midst. This text begs the question: Are we open to God’s Spirit disrupting our routine and transforming our lives and launching us on a God-inspired adventure? I fear that most of us are too busy, too distracted, too focused on what we will be doing next to notice God’s Spirit in our midst. How well can you simply be in the moment, alert for God’s whispers in your soul?

Beyond declaring that we can be touched by God’s Spirit anywhere, Pentecost signals God’s intention for us to be unified, but not homogenized. God is not intent on destroying our differences so that we all think alike. God not only loves diversity, God instigates it.

Whenever Christianity has attempted to force everyone into the exact same expression of the faith, someone has been oppressed. Whether it was crusaders in the Holy Land, or the army persecuting Native Americans or

merchant buying and selling African slaves, when a dominant power has attempted to enforce its cultural expression of the faith on people of another culture, it has been destructive. Priest and poet, John O'Donohue writes, "There is something deeply sacred about every presence. When we become blind to this, we treat people as if they were disposable objects."¹

Pentecost declares that you can be a follower of Jesus regardless of your language or culture. Differences need not be divisive. The Parthians will likely worship God and express their faith differently than the Libyans. The Romans will express their faith in ways that are peculiar to the Arabs. They will be unified by their love of Christ and by following his command to love others, but their expressions of compassion, their efforts for justice, and their work for peace may be expressed differently. There will be similarities and there will be differences, and it is not only acceptable, it is healthy and energizing and challenging.

Finally, Pentecost declares that the path to a rich life is by sharing our riches. In the final verses in today's passage, we read, "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

Initially the outsiders were amazed that the Galileans were translating the faith into different languages so that all could become followers of Jesus. However, what really attracted converts to the new faith was the way the disciples cared for people and shared whatever they owned. People who were hurting were helped. People who had been pushed to the margins of society were embraced and pulled into their community.

One scholar writes: "The best proof of the truth of the Christian faith is the quality of the discipleship of those who hold it; the best disproof is, alas, the same."² As followers of Jesus, how we live either attracts people to the way of Jesus or repels them. Our manner of living shows others that there is either something vital here or nothing of consequence.

What happens when we share our resources with people in need rather than living as if the point of life is to accumulate as much wealth as possible?

C. S. Lewis "imagined hell as a place where everyone gets what they want when they want it. This consumerist 'success' means each person needs neither God nor neighbor. Their only perceived need is to keep their accumulation of stuff safe from other people – so they keep moving to larger palaces farther and farther away from others...Heaven, by contrast, is marked by endless sharing, not only of food and other goods, but of joy, and of God."³

It is why we build houses with Habitat for Humanity, feed people at Emmanuel Dining Room, share our space with AA and NA groups, give backpacks to low income children and Christmas boxes to families in need. It is why we drive people to doctor appointments, visit people who are lonely or ill, support people who are trying to weather a storm, bring homeless people off the streets in the bitter cold, and stock food banks. It is why we form partnerships in Guatemala and Congo, support addiction recovery services and mental health agencies, and purchase steel drums to bring Jewish, Christian and Muslim youth together.

When we are alert to God's Spirit blowing through our community of faith God's love is shared, lives are changed, and those who are perceptive catch a glimpse of heaven.

NOTES

1. John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), p. 76.
2. Jason Byassee, "The Holy Spirit's New World Order," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2018, p. 17.
3. *Ibid.*

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Spirit of God — In the beginning, when the universe was unformed chaos, you danced across primeval waters and gave birth to creation. In an age of distress and doubt, you swirled around an unformed church and enlivened the body of Christ. In all times, you — Breath of God — stir us to life.

Today we celebrate the gift of your breath, which fills our lungs that we might glorify you. We celebrate the gift of your breath, which sustains this body that — together — we might bear witness to your love.

And, with this breath, we pray that your Spirit would — once again — stir us to life.

Wind of God — Descend upon us, as you descended upon disciples long ago, and energize your people. On that first Pentecost, you gave a newborn church language to tell your story. Now we ask for words to proclaim love to a culture plagued by prejudice, and peace to communities tormented by violence. Give us wisdom, that we might offer counsel to a world craving your vision, and courage, that we might demand justice for a creation thirsting for wholeness. Wind of God — Descend upon us, we pray.

Heavenly Dove — Commission us for service, as you commissioned disciples long ago, and help us carry out our common calling. At the River Jordan, you anointed Jesus to bring good news to the poor; and in Jerusalem, you sent the faithful to continue his work. Empower us that we, too, might participate in Christ's ministry — bringing healing to a wounded world, and hope to communities in chaos. May our hands be your hands and our feet, your feet — to mend and to march, to love and to lead. Heavenly Dove — Commission us, we pray.

Divine Fire — Inspire us, as you inspired disciples long ago, and infuse us with Pentecostal power. With tongues of flame, you ignited your church with passion for your good news. Renew our conviction, that we too might tell of your grace, and extend it to others through acts of compassionate service. By your Spirit, draw us into your transformative work, until our common life incarnates your vision for creation. Divine Fire — Inspire us, we pray.

Holy Comforter — You know our inmost hearts. For — even when we do not know how to pray as we ought — you intercede with sighs too deep for words. So we draw near to you, trusting that you have already drawn near to us. Hear our prayers:

For the people of Santa Fe, Texas, who grieve in the wake of another, horrific shooting ...

For the people of Israel and Palestine, who long for the peace that can only flow from justice ...

For those dear to us, whom we name before you in the silence of our hearts ...

Spirit of God — Hear us now, as we offer the prayer Christ taught us: **Our Father...**