



"Sent"

Scripture – Acts 2:1-21

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 23, 2021

When I seek to make sense of Luke's story of Pentecost, it helps to remember that he was writing 40-50 years after the actual event. Much had happened in the intervening decades. Those first followers of Jesus had turned out to be remarkable leaders.

They taught people the divine wisdom of Jesus and, in their manner of living, modeled the radical love of Jesus. No one could have imagined that these ordinary people – most of them uneducated and lacking an impressive pedigree – might become a formidable force. No one could have predicted their astonishing success in creating new communities of faith.

Remember that after Jesus was arrested and crucified, his disciples were cowering behind bolted doors in a nondescript location in Jerusalem. They were anxiously awaiting a midnight knock on the door when the powers-that-be would drag them away. And if they were fortunate enough to escape the same fate as Jesus, what would they do with the rest of their lives? Can you imagine how depressing fishing and collecting taxes would be after spending three power-packed years with Jesus?

When the disciples gathered together on Pentecost, they had no idea what was to come next. To get a handle on the stress level of the disciples, the Reverend Amy Butler went online and completed the **Social Readjustment Rating Scale**. This test rates the stressors in your life and your susceptibility to stress-related illness. You mark which events have happened to you in the past 12 months. The list includes such things as the death of a close friend, trouble with the law, change in your family situation, and vocational upheaval. She selected those things that had happened to the disciples, not in the previous year, but only in the seven weeks prior to Pentecost.

After you have marked the selections, the test gives you a score. A score of 0 – 149 indicates a low susceptibility to stress-related illness. This is when life is humming along with no real hiccups. A score of 150 – 299 indicates a medium susceptibility to stress-related illness. This is when you've experienced a handful of significant blows in 12 months. A score of over 300 and you will likely become ill. This is when far too many things have gone south and life is an everyday struggle. Taking the test as the disciples, guess what score they would have registered – 644! In other words, after what they had been through, it's shocking they were not in the morgue.¹

Today's text says they had gathered together – most likely to grieve and commiserate – when something happened to them. Something stirred in their souls and launched them onto remarkable paths. Luke says it happened when Jews were celebrating the festival of Pentecost. This was a major festival when Jews from all over

the known world flooded Jerusalem to celebrate the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. However, it was what happened to the followers of Jesus that stole the show. Something turbocharged the disciples.

Luke writes: "There came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

A violent wind rushing through the house? Tongues of fire resting on each disciple? The Holy Spirit filling them so that they can speak in foreign languages? One thing we can be certain of; this was not a Presbyterian study group!

In some ways, Pentecost strikes me as the most un-Presbyterian day on the church calendar. It just doesn't fit our M.O., does it? We are practical and predictable, we are rational and reserved. We do not embrace wild, ecstatic experiences of the Spirit. So, one way to treat this passage is to simply write it off as an incomprehensible tale from the ancient world.

There is another possibility. Since Luke wrote these words decades after the event, when he had seen with his own eyes the amazing accomplishments of those first followers of Jesus, maybe his language was as much poetry as prose. Maybe it was Luke's way of telling the world that after Jesus was no longer physically present, his disciples did not pack up and go back to their former jobs. Instead, God's Spirit inspired and transformed them for new adventures.

Maybe they were aroused by a sudden, emotional experience that clarified their purpose, or maybe it was a more gradual awakening to God's Spirit. Either way, they clearly woke up.

Luke says it was at Pentecost when God's Spirit lit a fire in the followers of Jesus and spurred them to spread the message. They became bold witnesses in both word and deed of God's love for the world. And as Luke's story makes clear – the whole world: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, in other words, their focus was on the entire known world. This new faith was not reserved for the few, it was to be shared with everyone.

In a recent publication, our Mission Presbyter, Tracy Keenan, wrote about a Netflix series called *Pretend It's a City*. Tracy says the title comes from Fran Liebowitz's scathing and hilarious critique of people visiting her beloved New York City. Complaining that out-of-towners tend to stop in the middle of a busy sidewalk to look at a map or text someone without any consideration for the masses of people behind them, who then have to stop, bump into one another, and move around them, she says, 'Pretend it's a city.' In other words, picture countless other people around, and be aware that we are all trying to navigate this world. Consider that what you do affects me, and what I do affects you. You are not alone here. If it is not obvious at first, use your imagination to see a world beyond yourself. 'Pretend it's a city'...(then) lean toward the good of the whole."²

Pentecost is not simply a recognition of something that happened 2,000 years ago. It is more than a celebration of the day the divine energy lit a spark in the disciples launching *them* on *their* mission. Pentecost reminds us that God's Spirit repeatedly urges US to go beyond ourselves. God wants us to resist the hyper-individualism that permeates our culture and to lean toward the good of the whole.

God's inspiration touches each one of us, whether it occurs in a dramatic and mysterious event, such as the one Luke narrated, or in a modest and unassuming fashion, such as an intuition or a fresh insight. The question is:

How open are we to affirming God's activity in our lives? How committed are we to leaning toward the good of the whole?

For more than a year now, we have witnessed the power of a virus – invisible to the human eye – spread around the planet ravaging people's lives. A colleague asks, "What if we spread something besides a virus around the world in the next year, something that would bring healing instead of suffering. Imagine if we committed ourselves to spreading not germs,"³ but kindness, justice, and peace. Goodness knows, the people of our planet are starving for these things.

Do you know about the organization called The Parents Circle – Families Forum? They are one of the only groups in the world that does not wish to welcome any new members into their ranks. They are a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization of over 600 families, all of whom have lost an immediate family member to the ongoing conflict. Unfortunately, their ranks will grow in the coming days as a result of the deaths of the past two weeks.

Imagine the courage it takes to sit down with the other side who is responsible for the death of your loved one. Through their suffering, they have come to understand the necessity of recognizing each person as a child of God. We were privileged to hear their stories on one of our pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

In the past few days, they posted this statement on their website: "A ceasefire has been reached in Israel and Gaza, but the members of the Parents Circle know that bloodshed is inevitable again without a process of reconciliation, in the pursuit of a just peace agreement, and an end to the occupation."

Do we have to experience such a tragedy ourselves before we seek to pursue justice and peace for all?

You can scrutinize every passage in the gospels, and you will not find one instance in which Jesus says, "Play it safe." Comb through the words of Jesus and you will never discover a moment when he counsels, "Keep to yourself." He was always challenging people to go beyond the barriers we construct and to touch the lives of others with the grace with which we've been blessed.

At Pentecost, God's Spirit stirred in the souls of those first followers and inspired them to spread the love of God. They had no idea if they would be successful, they simply did what Jesus had shown them and God's Spirit coaxed them to do. The results of their efforts were beyond anything they could have imagined.

May we feel the pressure of God's hand on our backs pushing us out into the world.

NOTES

1. Amy Butler, "If We Knew Then..." *asemonforeversunday.com*, for May 23, 2021.
2. Tracy Keenan, *Presbytery Pause*, May 13, 2021.
3. Anna George Trayham, "The Miracle of Pentecost," *Day1.org*, May 23, 2021