

A Generous Spirit (Part 1)
Sermon 185 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 28, 2023
Acts 2:1-8, 12-21

I don't know about you, but I have found it quite difficult to get myself into the Pentecost spirit with this dreary weather we have been having.

Pentecost Sunday is a bit like Memorial Day weekend in that, it is a celebration of a new season. Memorial Day marks the arrival of summer and Pentecost marks the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the church. The two celebrations often match up with one another for one unforgettable weekend! But this year, both seem to be lacking.

Due to the cold and rainy weather, parents looking for a place where kids can get out some energy have turned from the traditional spot on the beach to the much less aesthetically pleasing trampoline park.

And rather than reports of record-breaking church attendance for the annual birthday celebration, we find ourselves greeted with statistics about church decline, news of churches closing their doors in droves, increasing mistrust of institutionalized religion. Mmmm, happy birthday, church. Enjoy it while it lasts!! Seems like our days may be numbered.

It brings to mind this amazing quote from Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? ... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping, God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Pentecost – though often long forgotten in the modern list of religious holidays – is the most appropriate day for us to remember the waking God who draws us out to where we can never return.

Though we have tidied it up a bit and found more sensible ways to celebrate: like donning the sanctuary with red paraments and singing songs about the Spirit, maybe we should take Annie Dillard's advice and hand out crash helmets, life preservers, and signal flares... Unless of course, we are more attached to our domesticated Spirit... the one that leaves us safely situated and comfortable in our pews - even on Pentecost!

But when we read the story and remember what happened to those disciples who gathered still and safe in their Jerusalem room. We have to ask ourselves... Do we even believe a word of it?!

Pentecost wasn't always a birthday party for the Christian church. It actually predates the church by thousands of years and the nature of its celebration has changed throughout history. Pentecost was originally an agricultural celebration that marked the seventh week after Passover. If there are seven days in a week, then the seventh week would be a week of weeks. So Pentecost was originally the Festival of Weeks, which meant it was the end of harvest and time for worship, rest, renewal.

If you read the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy much, you'll pick up on the liturgical rhythms and how they are intimately woven together with the every-day-life-rhythms of the Hebrew people.

So just as God rests on the seventh day of creation, the people rest on the seventh day of the week... and here, on this seventh week of seven days, the land and the people all rest from their labor in order to celebrate and invoke the holy rhythms of work, worship, rest, and renewal.

After the destruction of the first Temple, the traditional Pentecost feast evolved into something else, a celebration of the law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This, of course, commemorated the new covenant, the new law to fit the new situation in which the Hebrew people found themselves.

This time it wasn't a covenant or a liturgical rhythm connected to the land, for the people did not have their land anymore. They were a nomadic and placeless people, journeying through wilderness, together. As their relationship with the land had changed, so did their covenant with God.

Over time and in the Christian tradition, the Pentecost celebration has continued to evolve, taking on new life, and highlighting a new moment in our history.

As our story goes, the disciples were in Jerusalem after the ascension. They were all gathered together in a room. Luke (who wrote the Book of Acts) is clear that this is not just the twelve named disciples but all the disciples, including the women and the children whom he mentioned earlier in Chapter 1. Outside the room the streets were full not only because it was a holiday weekend in Jerusalem, but also because there were lots of people - devout, religious people - who came to live out their days in the comfort of the holy city.

Typically Pentecost was a celebration, a festival for all people of faith. But in this particular year, on this Pentecost, the mood was somewhat conflicted. Many were excited to celebrate the traditional feast; but the disciples were anxious and worried about their future. [I mean...] It wasn't all that long ago that Jesus was crucified just outside this same town, around the time of another traditional religious celebration. The trauma of that kind of experience doesn't quickly fade. Surely it still lingers in their minds as they gather for this celebration. After the crucifixion, they saw Jesus again, resurrected, just as he'd said. But he didn't stay long, or long enough for their liking. He left them again when he ascended into heaven and asked them to carry on with the Gospel work. So we might imagine that as the disciples gathered for this first religious feast after Jesus left them again, that they might be a little apprehensive about the imminent celebration.

Now... we know how the story goes because we have heard it a million times. But I'd like to take a moment to pause [right here] and reflect because I think there might be an opportunity... no a lesson, and maybe even some good news here, for us, today.

Have you ever found yourself - after an experience of trauma (after receiving some bad news, after the sudden death of a loved one, after an unexpected diagnosis, after sudden job loss, something major that interrupted your life in a scary or negative way). Have you ever found yourself feeling kind of numb? Numb from all the newness thrust into your life without warning, invitation, or preparation. Numb from the strangeness of the words that now have

become your story. Numb from having to relive it as you answer the simple question: How are you? Or if you haven't felt numb per se, then how about defeated and exhausted? Just stretched beyond your limits and longing for something - anything - familiar and ordinary?

That is how I imagine the disciples felt as they sat in the room. I wasn't there, and Luke doesn't tell us, but I can totally feel it ... can't you? I have been in those rooms, we have been in those rooms together: still, quiet, with energy so low it seems as if time itself were standing still.

Through the lens of our own experience, we can imagine the disciples all sitting there, lining the perimeter of the room, taking in one heavy breath after another, wondering if their energy would ever return, wondering if in their scarcity God could do anything good. But here's the thing: it was precisely into that despair, into that decline, into that utter scarcity that the Spirit began to blow.

There was no warning, no early signal giving away the surprise; JUST a rush of wind, fire, and new life blowing in and hovering over their heads like a flame. With the fire came a new skill, all of them began to speak new languages!

You can imagine the shock of it all when the once-lifeless room is now vibrantly buzzing with words unknown just moments ago. And while some like to say this was the gift of tongues - the spiritual language - the text is clear that the disciples are speaking known, human languages because as this story goes, the people in the streets understand in their native tongues - no translation needed.

The story of God's love unfolding throughout history is being told in such new and diverse ways that now everyone can hear and receive it in their own way. What a generous Spirit (!!)... Breaking through the perceived decline, the certain end, the utter scarcity of the disciples felt and in one sudden move, empowering them with new gifts uniquely suited for this particular moment in history...

Language for the people gathered outside who'd never before heard of God's love in a way that they could fully understand. A generous expression of a

generous Spirit using new language spoken through weary and numb disciples at precisely the moment when they feared that they had nothing left to give. This is the promise of Pentecost. That even when we are broken, when we are weary, when we are depleted of every resource, when we struggle to imagine a future... These are precisely the kinds of moments when the Spirit of God has room to blow through.

These are precisely the moments when we are humble enough to recognize that God has not stopped working, but that God's work is simply more expansive, more inclusive than we previously imagined.

What a generous Spirit!!... to keep on creating life where there seemed to be no life. Of course, as is often the case, there were some who did not understand - much less approve of - what was happening in Jerusalem. They could hear all the commotion but rather than receiving the gift, they chose to mock and sneer at the disciples saying, "They've just had too much wine. They've lost their minds!"

But of course, the irony is that they were the ones missing out and missing the point. They were the ones left behind as the Spirit began breathing the wind of new life.

New Testament scholar Justo Gonzales contends that there's an important detail we sometimes gloss over when reading and remembering the Pentecost story. He says that the line:

"Are not all those who are speaking Galileans?"
should be read today as:

"Are not all these people ignorant and backward Galileans?"

Because the Galileans were definitely not the typical preachers and teachers of religion, they were perpetual outsiders, and here, through their own mouths the Spirit revives the church.

Isn't it wild how often God chooses those whom religion has deemed unworthy to inform and re-form the church?

Maybe it doesn't feel like Pentecost for us quite yet because we are still in the room. Maybe we are struggling to feel the Spirit because we too are worn

down, weary, stretched beyond our limits...

But even still... We have to remember that the quiet room is just the beginning of the story! So maybe there is more for us ahead. Maybe we are just a few labored breaths away from transformation as we sit here in our pews. But do we really believe it? Do we really believe the Spirit still comes like a rushing wind with life and breath and holy energy for creating something new? I mean, wouldn't it be great for the church to be awake and alive like that again!?

Well... if we really want it, if we really believe it is possible, and if we really want to be a part of it... then we'd better take off our Sunday best and exchange it for some safety gear, because when that Spirit comes, it will come without warning to draw us out

- equip us with new skills
- new gifts
- new words
- new songs
- new ministries
- new dreams
- new visions
- and new kinds of people

and when we become open to those gifts from the Holy Spirit... we will be drawn out to where we can never return.

So buckle up friends... put on your crash helmets because if we can just have a little faith... it's going to be one wild and holy unforgettable ride.

Come, Holy Spirit Come
Come and breathe your life
into our weary souls

So that we might live again...

-Amen.

