

**May 15, 2016, Pentecost**  
**TEXT: Acts 2:1–21**  
**TITLE: Why Are We Here?**

Why are we here? It is a question that has confounded philosophers and scientists alike in their shared and sometimes divergent search for meaning. Are we here to fulfill a divine mandate, participate in a heavenly plan? Are we here to further a species, play our small part in a complex biosystem? Are we here to create: to make fine art, to solve ethical problems, to advance technology, to write novels? Are we here to contribute: to use our gifts for the wellbeing of others, to nurture and teach and guide? Or are we just here—a random collection of cells clustered together in human form simply trying to survive? German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “I don’t know why we are here, but I’m pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.”

So why are we here? Physicist Jim Holt suggests that we are here because we have, in essence, hit the “cosmic lottery”. He says, “our existence would seem to be amazingly improbable, because there’s an enormous number of genetically possible humans, if you can compute it by looking at the number of genes and the number of alleles and so forth, and a back-of-the-envelope calculation will tell you there are about 10 to the 10,000<sup>th</sup> possible humans, genetically....And the number of the actual humans that have existed is 100 billion, maybe 50 billion, an infinitesimal fraction....” He goes on to say: “The universe is absurd, but we can still construct a purpose, and that’s...pretty good.”<sup>1</sup>

Improbable people forming a purpose out of an absurd universe.

Our scripture lesson for this morning takes us to the intersection of improbable and absurd. Our story for this morning is equipped with a windstorm from heaven, descending tongues of fire unleashing prophetic speech and startling understanding where once there was division, as Jews from every nation under heaven heard the disciples speaking and understood them in their own tongue.

We are now in the last days, Peter says—the time of which the prophets foretold—where God’s Spirit is sent to dwell among and within God’s people. This will be a season of radical awakening, of rebirth. Men and women, young and old, servant and free, will gain special insight into God’s heart. They will see visions and dream dreams. They will notice God at work within and through all of creation. And God will work wonders throughout all the earth—offering unpredictable and astonishing signs, indicators of God’s power and salvation.

This Pentecost chaos brought rebirth. As the Spirit brooded over the waters of chaos at the dawn of creation, the Spirit once more brought new life. Confusion brought clarity. Chaos ushered in call. God was on the move, arriving in unexpected, unpredictable

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/jim\\_holt\\_why\\_does\\_the\\_universe\\_exist/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/jim_holt_why_does_the_universe_exist/transcript?language=en)

ways—but always bringing about life, new life, redeemed life once more. It is both an eye-opening and terrifying spectacle at the same time.

On Pentecost it became clear that God’s dynamic Spirit could not be controlled or managed—but simply received.

Our text for this morning reminds us of the catalytic event that birthed the church. A post-ascension community learns that God is still at work among them. And this time, God’s proximity draws even nearer than it did when Jesus Christ walked and lived among them as their friend and teacher. This time God dwells within them, works through them. Hope is not lost. The story hasn’t ended. God is faithful still.

But now the disciples must give voice to God’s message. The baton has been passed to them. They will bear witness to the reality that God is present to and through ordinary people in extraordinary ways. As Barbara Brown Taylor says: “(The disciples) had sucked in God’s own breath and they had been transformed by it. The Holy Spirit had entered into them the same way it had entered into Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for the same reason. It was time for God to be born again—not in one body this time but in a body of believers who would receive the breath of life from their Lord and pass it on, using their own bodies to distribute the gift.”<sup>2</sup>

The text goes on to tell us that more than 3000 people were baptized that day. The community that we have come to know as the church was born. This community was known for its quality of life—marked by the sharing of their possessions, table fellowship together, and ardent prayer and study of God’s word. Their fundamental identity was found in God. God was at the heart of who they were as individuals, and it was God who unified them and made them one.

So why are we HERE? Why did we wake up this morning and put on our red clothes and gather to celebrate Pentecost this Sunday morning at East Liberty Presbyterian Church? Why is this an important place to be? What gives this community meaning? Why do we draw together for worship? Why are we here, now?

There are lots of answers we can give to this question.

Maybe we can say that we are here because someone invited us to come, or because we wanted to see these big beautiful stained glass windows from the inside for a change. Maybe we’re here because we like the music, think people are friendly, or even because we have a sense of duty that has stuck with us since our childhoods that tells us that church is where we are supposed to be on a Sunday morning.

Frankly, for some of us showing up this morning might be a radical act of courage. Many of us have known wounding at the hands of congregations and religious leaders who have espoused the conviction that some people didn’t belong. Some of us have

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Home By Another Way*. “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.” P 145.

heard it said that women don't have the right to speak in church, that homosexuality is a sin, and that superiority is measured in skin color. And so some of us have been left to wonder how we might reconcile our belief in a loving God with our painful encounters with people who have hurt us in God's name.

Somehow, in spite of our wounds we feel drawn to be a part of something bigger than just ourselves. In spite of our fear, and because of God's grace we have refused to give up—on ourselves, on others, on God. Many of us have come here today because we want to believe that God still works in our world—and that God might even work through us. We are here because we have hope against hope that God's power is meaningful in a world where so much seems to go wrong. We're here because we believe that we are more than random molecules adrift in a lonesome universe, but that we are inexplicably a part of something more.

There is something about a life of faith that must be lived together. Even when it is difficult—and even when the sins of broken people steal the limelight from the redemptive work of God—a life of faith is about more than simply professing a personal relationship with Christ. Yes, that is an important part of it—but faith doesn't stop there.

We see it in scripture and we see it in our own stories: Faith changes lives. It alters our identity and transforms the quality of our relationships. We want to be better. We want to forgive and be forgiven. We are filled with gratitude. We see that it is possible for us to be made whole. This transformation cannot play out fully in isolation. Even those called to a vocation of monastic living traditionally live out this call in community, still. God's Spirit calls us out of the isolation of our sin and brokenness and into a place of radical acceptance and prophetic hope. With the knowledge then that we are loved, we reach out in love to others.

Anne Lamott writes: "When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home—that is where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.'"<sup>3</sup>

She says of her church: "I saw something once that said... 'A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of a great meaning.' Our funky little church I filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food."<sup>4</sup>

We gather today because we hope—we even trust—that the Spirit of the Living God will show up here too. If God is true to God's self, God's Spirit will show up when we profess God's claim of Chloe through the waters of baptism and when we honor the gifts of seven teenagers who will profess their faith in a God who, according to them, forgives

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<sup>3</sup> Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies*. "Why I Make Sam Go To Church" p 100.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

and welcomes unconditionally. We trust that God will show up when we sing songs that saints have sung through the ages, and sit in silence and when we eat some bread together. We trust that God will show up when we offer the best we have to give—even our hard earned money, our earnest prayer, our smile of acceptance, our helping hands.

It happened all those years ago. When the Spirit showed up, divisions dating back to the tower of Babel ceased. The barriers that tore people up, created turf wars and superiority complexes released their hold. The Spirit's wild wind tore down these walls and opened up gateways for understanding and the possibility of peace.

And so we trust that God will show up now too, even when we mess up, when the community of the Church universal—or of the human family—seems fractured and in pain—not because we've earned God's presence, but because God is just like that. God is with us through it all.

Richard Rohr says this: "To span the infinite gap between the Divine and the human, God's agenda is to plant a little bit of God, the Holy Spirit, right inside of us! (Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 14:16 ff.)."<sup>5</sup>

Maybe we can say plainly that we are here, today, because God has planted the Holy Spirit right inside each one of us! God's Spirit has called and claimed each one of us—in the midst of the cyclones of our lives, and perhaps, simply, through a still, small voice. By the power of the Holy Spirit, our singular lives can be a part of great meaning in the world—a voice of justice, an agent of peace, an expression of welcome that changes a life.

May we—the improbable, absurd, beautiful redeemed people of God breathe in God's own breath and be changed. And then may our lives distribute this gift, with joy, to world.

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<sup>5</sup> Rohr, Richard. *Things Hidden* p 97