

September 9, 2018 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Acts 2:1–12

TITLE: Pentecost Spirit Today

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Let's be clear: despite the scripture passage I just read, today is not Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost was celebrated on May 20th. But when I was thinking about the worship services for today, a sneaky thought came to mind. What would happen if we focused on a holiday scripture passage when it wasn't that holiday? How would we hear the Christmas story differently if it was read in July or the Easter story if it was preached on in January? For this morning, we're going to explore what happens if you tell the Pentecost story when it's not Pentecost Sunday. Hopefully you'll hear the story in a different way and take away fresh lessons from this pivotal event in the history of the church. Ideally you'll learn something that applies to our sermon theme for the month—answering the question “What's next” in our lives of faith and our ministry as a church family.

First, we need to set the stage. Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified around the time of the Feast of Passover. On the Sunday morning after his death, he rose from the dead and appeared to Mary Magdalene and other women and men disciples. Despite the momentous nature of that Easter resurrection, the world continued to function as it always had. Shopkeepers still sold their wares in the streets of Jerusalem. In the temple, Caiaphas and the high priests still worried about any threats to their religious authority. Pontius Pilate still resided in the governor's palace, preoccupied with stamping out threats to Roman authority. And for the disciples of Jesus, things were in some ways worse now. They were still associated with a crucified revolutionary. They would gather in upper rooms, not simply to break bread and worship, but also because there was safety in numbers and meeting behind locked doors. Fifty days after Passover came another important Jewish harvest festival—the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost. Once more Jews traveled from all corners of the Roman Empire to bring their offerings to the temple in Jerusalem. Once more people would gather and gossip and ask about the news of the land, especially wondering if there'd been any new developments concerning the crucified rabbi and his followers.

Second, whatever happened on Pentecost long ago was neither quiet nor subtle. This isn't a story about the still, small voice of God. This is a story about noise—the sound of strong, even violent winds, the cacophony of everyone speaking at once in different languages. It's about people jostling for position in the crowded streets of Jerusalem, talking and being talked over—finally asking, “What does this all mean?” Which allows Peter to give an answer—to give his first sermon.

The Pentecost story concludes with the comment that over 3000 people heard and believed the good news of Christ that noisy day long ago. Not because they were less skeptical or less enlightened about life than we are today, because they weren't. Not because they were more predisposed to change their habits and traditions than we are today, because they weren't. And not because it was safer and easier to become a

follower of Jesus Christ back then versus now, because it wasn't. Something messy, unsettling, and powerful happened on Pentecost that is worth talking about whether it is Pentecost Sunday or not.

Acts 2 describes an event in which God's spirit was poured out—poured out upon the disciples, then upon their interactions with the crowd, and finally upon the women and men who accepted the good news of Jesus' resurrection and loving-justice for all humankind. So, if God is the one doing the "pouring out" of this Spirit, by definition was this flow stingy or generous? Would God use an eye-dropper or a wide-mouthed pitcher? Would it gently fill a teacup or be like a rush of water flowing over the land, a burst of wind messing up hair, literally trying to blow us off balance?

Most importantly, who is the recipient of this "poured out" Spirit? Was it a one time event just for the people in Jerusalem back then? Does the Spirit only pour out over us Americans? Over us Presbyterians? Over us ELPC members? The apostle Peter began his inaugural sermon by quoting the Old Testament prophet Joel, saying "*God declares I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.*" It was never meant to be a private, centripetal act, pulling us in upon ourselves; it was always designed to be generous and centrifugal—sending us out, confident that in all places God is at work for the hope and healing of the nations.

Every time that Acts 2 is read, we hear that crazy list of 15 nations—and likely tell ourselves, "Boy, I'm glad I wasn't asked to be the liturgist this Sunday." In the days of Jesus and the early church, the Roman Empire held all power and Rome was considered to be the center of the known Western world. So if you were going to talk about the world, you would name all the different provinces of the Roman Empire spread out around the Mediterranean Sea—with your description implying that the old saying was true: All roads lead to Rome.

But the author of Acts wanted to tell a different story about a different power—God's power revealed in Christ, not Caesar's power on a throne in Rome. So he imagined standing in Jerusalem amid a huge crowd of pilgrims gathered for the Pentecost feast. He identified the lands from which they came, moving from east to west in large sweeping gestures. Beyond the eastern edge of the Roman Empire were the Parthians, Medes and Elamites, coming closer to home were Judea, Mesopotamia and Cappadocia. Northwest in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) were Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia—southwest along the northern shore of Africa were Egypt, Libya and Cyrene. Far to the west was Rome—and in-between was Crete, plus Arabs coming from the south. This world was not shaped by Roman power but by God's power—God's Spirit blowing these pilgrims to that city square in Jerusalem on that day so they might hear from the apostles the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and then do what? Return back home! Pentecost literally changed the world—re-defined the world, no longer shaped by a Roman regional power but by a centrifugal, global God.

Now, having said all this, your response might resemble what was spoken by the Pentecost crowd long ago: "What does this all mean?" The world wasn't different after

the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But people of faith saw the world differently. They saw God's power and mercy and justice in a new way and that made all the difference in the world. One way you can characterize this difference is a phrase I read in a book not too long ago. The author said that healthy, vital congregations are ones who remember that their center is the periphery. The center of our church life, our church activity, budget priorities, and ministry should not be right here—but rather out there, on the periphery, at the boundaries of our common life.

What exactly does that mean—or, to highlight our sermon theme, “What’s next” if that is our scripture insight for today? **#1**) It means that when we are making decisions, we should not decide what to do based solely on who’s immediately around us, who’s in our inner circle. The philosopher Immanuel Kant thought that we should act in such a way that if our action became a universal rule, it would still be just and fair for all people. Now, it is hard to imagine how my shopping choices or driving decisions or spending habits need to look if they were to become a universal rule. But I can think about enlarging my decision-making circle even slightly before I make my choice. I can ask myself: Does this purchase make sense for me AND for my children or the needs of my family? Does this rule work for the neighborhood where I live AND for the next township? Is this policy fair whether I’m white or black, high school or college educated, gay or straight or transgender? If I included that person on the periphery in this discussion, will my words be different—or will the answers I come up change?

The Pentecost Holy Spirit doesn’t blow in order to confirm what you’re already doing. It isn’t designed to reinforce the status quo. By definition it is blowing us to a new place—to new relationships—to stand beside people on the periphery and figure out together how to make that zone the center of our Christian life, prayer, mission and ministry.

#2 and finally: The Pentecost “what’s next” involves asking ourselves, “Do I trust God? Do I trust the Holy Spirit, even as it redefines my world, shuffles my personal GPS, and expands my comfort zone?” When Nicodemus went to see Jesus by night and was told how he had to be born anew, born from above, part of Jesus’ words to him were these: “Don’t be astonished...The wind and Spirit blow where it chooses; you don’t know from where it comes and where it goes.” So like Nicodemus, do we dare trust to follow this wind?

As you think about “what’s next” for you as a child of God, remember that most of this Pentecost stuff will only make sense in hindsight—when you look back as you stand in a new place, perhaps out on the periphery, and recognize that God’s Spirit led you here and it made all the difference in the world. One day we’ll know fully, even as we have been fully known all along by God. So happy not-Pentecost day. Trust in the Lord always. Listen: I think the wind is picking up right now!

AMEN.