

## **May 23, 2021 (Pentecost) | Sanctuary Worship Service**

**TEXT:** [Acts 2:1–18](#)

**TITLE:** **Spirit Dreams and Visions**

By the Rev. BJ Woodworth

Pentecost Sunday a year ago, was my last Sunday pastoring the Open Door, a church I helped start and pastored for 17 years. Due to the pandemic, I was unable to gather in person for worship with them on that day. Then I began my work here at ELPC, distanced from all of you. So, to be preaching on Pentecost, on the first Sunday where we have people back in the Sanctuary for worship, is an honor and feels significant to me.

I want to say thank you. Thank you for welcoming me, amidst these strange times. Thank you for encouraging me as I have sought to find my way in my leadership and relationship to you. Thank you for the ways you have fully participated in the spaces I have sought to hold. Thank you for your openness to God working in our lives together. Thank you for being a welcoming inclusive, open and hospitable church—TO ME!!

As we gather here on Pentecost and the first Sunday in 15 months with people in the sanctuary, many people vaccinated, spring having sprung; birds chirping, sun shining, there is hope in the air. It feels a bit like we are sitting at a pivot point where hope is emerging and yet we are still waiting. Like we are standing on a threshold, ready to step into a new time and space but with some grief, fear and worry and uncertainty still linger in our spirits. Are you with me on that?

I wonder if this is how those close followers of Jesus felt, who in just under 2 months' time had endured the distress of Jesus arrest, trial death and burial...then the disorienting surprise and shock of his empty tomb and rumors of him rising from the dead. Many then had direct encounters and appearances in personal ways with Jesus—eating, cooking, fishing, talking and telling stories. And then waiting and wondering what all this meant—anticipating further instructions, from Jesus. Waiting for this promised Holy Spirit and this power he kept talking about.

AND THEN...Jesus leaves again. He ascends on a cloud into heaven. They are literally left looking at the sky wondering where he had gone and wondering what to do next. So, they do what they know—gather together and pray, listen and wait.

Then 10 days later things get crazy, as they are gathered in that room praying a violent wind blows through, tongues of fire descend upon people, people begin speaking in languages they've never spoken before, linguistic barriers are broken down and hopes, dreams and visions are promised.

What can we learn from observing the way and manner in which the Holy Spirit showed up on this birth day of the church? How can we borrow from the story of this small group of people gathered in a time of transition, praying, listening and waiting to figure out what life might look like in our own time of transition, hoping and wondering?

I see three characteristics of Spirit's presence in this account of the day of Pentecost that I also see PRESENT AND GROWING IN ELPC.

First, there is always MOVEMENT IN THE SPIRIT. When we give ourselves over to the Spirit and give her permission to lead and guide us, the Holy Spirit will move us.

The Spirit is always poking, prodding, expanding, growing, convicting, pushing boundaries and widening her embrace. Jesus says the Spirit flows like living waters, she moves like breath and wind, sometimes violently according to Luke's description here. She is like fire, uncontrollable, consuming, enlightening, forceful, dangerous and warming. The Holy Spirit movement is both beautiful and disruptive and joyful and painful.

Question: ELPC what has Spirit been teaching you and us about being a church when we are unable to gather in person? How has she been nudging us to be open-up, move, grow, expand and widen our embrace and understanding of what constitutes church? How has she been inviting us to slow down, listen and focus our mission?

You as a church are already a Spirit-breath of fresh air to many. I have heard the countless stories of wounded wonderers finding welcome here. Keep it up! Don't grow static; continue to allow new movement and expansion to flow out of the Spirit-living water of your hearts! AND...don't settle for what Spirit has done in you and through you so far, go deeper, allow Spirit to expand your heart, mind, body and soul, listen, wait and pray together for how the spirit wants us to move.

Secondly, the movement of the Spirit has a purpose and that is to SEND US OUT. A Spirit directed church exists for the world not for itself. The church is a community created by God's Spirit to carry on the earthly ministry of Jesus and be the signpost of the new humanity he represents. Christ came with a dream and vision to set people free and heal them. Now there is a church community embodying that freedom and healing in the world. Such a community, writes Clark Pinnock, "is intended to depict what God wants the world to become. At Pentecost a ruptured and broken world began to heal. People from all over the world came together and began to understand one another. The community was formed, full of differences and yet united and it's longing for the coming of the kingdom... 'through the pouring out of the Spirit, God effected a world-encompassing... multilingual... poly-individual... testimony to Godself [Michael Welker].'" (Flame of Love, pg. 118-119).

ELPC you are this kind of community. So, keep moving, keep going, keep sending and being sent, keep looking for who is excluded and where love, freedom and grace is needed. Keep throwing up your sails into the wind of the Spirit that she might lead us into deeper and unfamiliar waters.

This is one of the most beautiful and frustrating aspects of the Holy Spirit. She is never content with what is and who is gathered. As soon as we think we've become a

welcoming, hospitable and inclusive community, all of a sudden, the Spirit seems to move and work outside of our little circled community. And then ever so gently Spirit sends us, invites us to go and participate with “them”, and widen our embrace to someone else we had excluded. Are you with me?

This naturally leads to the final movement of the Spirit. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS UNIVERSAL. In fulfillment of Spirit-filled words given by a prophet named Joel, Peter applies this sacred text to this moment and declares, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon ALL FLESH. The Holy Spirit is always given for the common good of ALL PEOPLE.

Julian of Norwich puts it this way, “The love of God creates in us such a ‘oneing’ that when it is truly seen, no person can separate themselves from another person.”

And guess what? This dream and vision of unity come from societally marginalized and oppressed people. Spirit’s vision for unity most often blows and burns from the margins of society. Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of South American Liberation Theology, said that the poor and marginalized are God’s “interruption” upon the lives of the comfortable and privileged. Their presence, place and voice in history is, in the words of Henri Nouwen, are, “a genuine irruption of God in the world.”

In place of a gated community that excludes and builds walls, Spirit fashions a centered-set, open sourced and generously distributed community poured out on all flesh; all are welcomed, included and valued as full participants in the community of God. It is a community where the Spirit empowers others to speak the language of another people group that is not their native tongue. Spirit fosters humble listening, learning, honoring and valuing of the other’s story; seeking to know another’s culture, pain, spirit, heart, joys, customs and allowing it to shape and form the communal life moving forward.

To people of cultural, economic, racial religious and privilege and power (those already graciously included) this movement of the Spirit often feels like a “violent wind.” It requires a reckoning with past injustices, interior biases and prejudices, acknowledging mistakes and bringing shameful pasts out of the shadows and into the light. It requires those in power to relinquish control, acknowledging that their way of being in the world and thinking about life is not the only way to do things. It requires a humble heart for it can be humiliating. But this is how the all-inclusive and universal Spirit works. This is her mission and is therefore ours as well.

ELPC, on this Pentecost Sunday as we sit on the cusp figuring out what life looks like together, may we have the courage to continue to listen, wait and pray and then follow the movement of Spirit wind and fire. Even when the wind is feels disruptive and the fire burns hot. May we dwell in her deep oneness as we do so. Let us put into action our dream of becoming a Matthew 25 church and deepen our commitment to our mission of being “a diverse community of believers, showing God’s unconditional love by providing

refuge for spiritual growth, ardently pursuing justice, and extending Christ's radical hospitality to all."

AMEN!