

**SCRIPTURE READING:** Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." <sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup>'In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

<sup>19</sup>And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

<sup>20</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup>Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

### ***“Together in the Spirit”***

Well, today is Pentecost, the birthday of the church and it is a very different celebration for us. You might be saying, *“Of course, everything’s different this year.”* And you’d be right, but it might be worth our while, in the context of this time and this Scripture, to think through why it’s so different.

*“They were all together in one place”*, Luke’s story begins. *“They were all together in one place”*. The believers were presumably hunkered down, “hunkered in a bunker”, so to speak. They were hiding behind closed doors, out of sight, praying continuously and trying to maintain some safety in numbers and support of one another. They were believers in Jesus, their resurrected Lord, but they did not know WHERE to go next. They did not know WHAT to do. They did not know HOW to BE his followers. They were not yet equipped to venture out into the world. Jesus had left them for a second time, 10 days prior. He’d left them hanging at the edge, as he ascended to be with his Father, with only promises and a charge to wait for the Spirit.

But then something happened. Something utterly fantastic happened!!! In fact, to be totally frank, over the centuries the Church has restrained the story’s explanation a bit partly because it was such a marvelous event. It’s hard to tell a story that is so truly fantastic. Suddenly the wind blew, like a holy hurricane, a heavenly tempest. When it happened, they must have known it was like the *ruach*, that great wind which the Creator blew over the face of the earth “in the Beginning”, God’s life-force, the Almighty’s breath blowing this way and that, swirling things around and shaking things up in the room. And everything was changed in a moment’s time, in the blink of an eye. Annie Dillard, in writing about the Spirit says that *“the Spirit blows and goes where it will. It’s intended to be a little bit unruly and unpredictable, but if we really dealt with the power of the Spirit openly and honestly, we would come to church wearing crash helmets and the ushers would issue us life preservers and signal flares and strap us to our pews.”*<sup>1</sup> Right. Then, in that place where they were all together, what

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard. Quoted from sermon delivered by Rev. Cannon Jan Naylor Cope on May 15, 2016. <https://cathedral.org/staff/the-rev-canon-jan-naylor-cope>. (accessed 5-27-20).

was like a fire ignited! Suddenly, those who were hunkered down began to speak languages that were not their own, many languages, all at once. Their “babble” was the word of the Lord, and most scholars believe it echoed and subverted the curse in Israel’s history, the curse of the tower of Babel. “And a bit of theological humor proves instructive. No, these people are not drunk,” Luke says. Even rowdy Galileans wouldn’t start imbibing this early in the day.”<sup>2</sup>

Barbara Brown Taylor imagines it this way, *“Like a room full of bagpipes all going at once, they began to set up such a racket that they drew a crowd. People from all over the world were in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost, or the feast of weeks, 50 days after Passover. They came leaning in the windows and pushing through the doors, surprised to hear the disciples speaking their own language so far from home. Parthians stuck their heads through the door expecting to see other Parthians and Libyans looked around for other Libyans; Cappadocians strained their necks to meet others from Cappadocia, but what they saw instead were a bunch of Galileans---rural types from northern Israel dressed in the equivalent of 1st c overalls---all of them going on and on eloquently about God’s mighty acts like a bunch of Ph.D.’s in middle eastern languages.”*<sup>3</sup> Yes, in the blink of an eye the world had changed. The status quo was no more.

Ultimately, by the end of that first Pentecost day over 3000 people from all across the Empire and from all kinds of ethnic communities had been baptized. These were people of different languages and customs, with different experiences and expectations. They came from huge diversity, but they came together through Peter’s preaching of the one true Christ, and therefore through a common knowledge of the indwelling Spirit of God. Indeed, as the prophet Joel predicted, *“God’s Spirit was to be poured out on all people”* and *“everyone who called upon the name of the Lord would be saved.”* (let me repeat with a bit of emphasis). The Spirit of the living God had been set loose in the world. The huddled together disciples were now packing their bags to head out. And I can’t but imagine, they were not running to do so.

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<sup>2</sup> Debra Dean Murphy. *“Assembling in the Spirit”*. [www.ekkesiaproject.org/blog/2012/05/assembling-in-the-spirit/](http://www.ekkesiaproject.org/blog/2012/05/assembling-in-the-spirit/) (accessed 5/26/20).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. Sermon. *“The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.”* In: *Home by Another Way*. (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), 142-8.

Friends, what happened with the gathering at Pentecost cannot but be noticed as a move outward, as a pushing out of the boundaries. Just as Jesus' charge to his disciples was to take the message from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth, it was a move outward for the purpose of letting the gospel be more inclusive, to be what Debra Dean Murphy says was, "scandalously inclusive"<sup>4</sup>. *I recently witnessed another kind of gathering, one celebrated in a virtual kind of way. It was a medical school graduation. It was not, I'm sure, intended to be a spiritual event, but I was somehow spiritually moved just the same. I only caught a small portion of it. I listened to the charge given the candidates, and then I heard the cacophony, a beautiful cacophony of sound as they repeated the words of the Hippocratic oath. I was struck by the humility, compassion and owned responsibility in the ancient words. And THEN I saw the students' pictures being displayed in those boxes...you know, in that zoom kind of fashion we've become used to seeing....and I heard their names being called out as they were recognized. And it dawned on me that the list of names SOUNDED like the "list of nations" in Acts 2. Luke's list of Parthians, Elamites, Mesopotamians and Cappadocians, sounded so much like the list of medical school graduates from Saudi Arabia, India, Asia, Africa, and so on. And I began to think that the work these new doctors will do in their future practices has a very good chance at being shaped by a vision of scandalous inclusion too. They, in all their diversity, had spent these past intense years together and they likely had come to see something of the goodness of God in each other and by extension they will then hopefully see the same in all those diverse people they will soon be treating.*<sup>5</sup> Yes, the 3000 baptized on that first Pentecost spoke different languages, had different customs, brought varied experiences and expectations, and were by their very presence to each other demonstrating the inclusiveness and goodness of God who loves and does not restrict the gospel from any.

But the scandalous inclusion has an even deeper meaning than this. The soon to be believers were brought together through the preaching of the crucified Messiah. They were brought

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<sup>4</sup> Debra Dean Murphy. "Assembling in the Spirit". [www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2012/05/assembling-in-the-spirit/](http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2012/05/assembling-in-the-spirit/) (accessed 5/26/20).

<sup>5</sup> Illustration inspired by a similar one described by Debra Dean Murphy..

together through Messiah who went to the cross bearing the burden of the most vulnerable, the poor, the weak, the voiceless and the marginalized. He identified with these. He suffered as did they from the injustice placed upon him and the cruelty of the oppression he knew. He knew what it felt like to be a victim and to be sinned against. He knew what it was like to be abandoned. But he suffered not just for the victims, those struggling against the same powers he was resisting, but he suffered also for the victimizers for they agonized in the loneliness and the forsakenness of their dark hearts. He knew the same sense of loneliness for they were separated from God too. They were separated from God's will for them to live in the "abundance of life, and light and love" that God intended for them. Jesus consequently suffered in solidarity with victims and victimizers, with the sinners and sinned against, with the TOTALITY of the human condition. He was forsaken, abandoned, and died, going to the very depths, identifying with everyone. There is no place that God has not already gone for us...there is no place that is outside of God's presence. At no time...not even for a moment... is anyone or anything left outside of the saving reach of God!...no place too distant, desolate, or low. As David Lose concludes, "the unity of the many and varied baptized that day, the unity of the apostles who went out, our unity in diversity is found *"not in acts of strength but primarily in our shared humanity, vulnerability, and our great need."*<sup>6</sup> (repeat).

This is how our Pentecost celebration this year is different. It is different because we have the opportunity to know this even more poignantly than other years. It is more obvious and more real to us, now, more tangible than ever before. We are, as we have always been coming to be unified from different languages, different customs, varied experiences and expectations but we come additionally this year from different actual spaces (our homes, our work places, our cars), and even different kinds of vulnerability, hurting and need, all imposed on us by a global pandemic. Some of us are lonely, some of us weary, some of us apathetic, some of us panicked, some uncertain, impatient, depressed, exhausted, angry, confused, lost. Some are grieving. Some are sick. Some are dying. But yet we are unified by the movement of the ruach,

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<sup>6</sup> David Lose. "The Varied Gifts of the Spirit" <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/05/pentecost-a-the-varied-gifts-of-the-spirit/> (accessed 5-27-20)

the life force of God, the Holy Spirit indwelling us. We are unified. We are together unified in the Spirit, so that we can then, like the first apostles, disperse...this year differently, but yet...disperse to witness, in word and deed, our Christ, who came in weakness, to save the whole of humankind.

Brothers and sisters, wherever you are we are this year, huddling together...virtually,...in order that we then can be dispersed, to speak and to act not by our own wits, thanks be to God, but so that *“God’s Spirit will be poured out on all people”* and *“everyone, everyone, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”* Amen