

Birth, Wind and Fire
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Focus Text: Acts 2: 1-13

We just don't get it. Pentecost, I mean.

It's one of those dates in the church calendar that we know is important, but our celebration of it is more respectful than genuine. We welcome it like an out-of-town guest, someone we know, but not that well. If Hallmark doesn't print a card for it, we're not exactly sure how to celebrate it.

We try to make sense of it, though. We really do. We assign it a color, red, to remind us of the tongues of fire that possessed the twelve disciples gathered in that room. We put a few flames in the corners of our Presbyterian seal, to help us remember the Holy Spirit's inflaming presence.

We give this day a nickname, "The birthday of the church." And it's true, in a way. Amid the wind and the fire, something akin to church was born that day, when a gathering of believers were so filled with the Spirit that they proclaimed God's power, and people heard and came to believe the good news of the gospel.

The birthday motif makes this the perfect day to welcome our confirmands. With them among us now, fully as members, something has been born in them, and in us. Happy birthday, to us.

However, this is not Confirmation Sunday. It's Pentecost.

It may be that our inclination towards colors and birthday candles reveals our need to oversimplify the unknown, to distill vast mysteries into small, bite-sized pieces of chocolate cake with red frosting.

Pentecost, with all its noisy and passion-filled chaos, is too wild to be reduced to a color, or an easy-to-grasp meaning.

Pentecost might just be the domain of the right-brained among us; artists, musicians and poets. Pentecost demands artfulness from those who would preach about it. I'm not sure I have artfulness in me this morning.

But what I want to do is this. Reorient us. To help us approach Pentecost in a way that is less about our "getting it", and more about the Spirit of Pentecost "getting us."

Our hope should be to share the experience of the disciples in that room, rather than the confusion and cynicism that paralyzes the crowd around them.

To do this, we need to recognize ourselves in the crowd. They're more our type. They, like us, stand outside of the event, looking in.

The crowd asks questions. Three of them, to be precise. And I think if we look at these questions, we might see what kept them, and keeps us, from the experience of Pentecost.

The first one is this:

1. Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?

Recall that Jesus' core disciples, the ones who were in that room on Pentecost, did not hail from Jerusalem, the power center of Israel. They were outsiders, from Galilee.

The crowd, even though they are out-of-towners themselves, can't see how these Galileans can speak their language. They don't see how "those" kind of people could do something that extraordinary. It doesn't meet up with their preconceived notions.

The crowd forgot that in God's kingdom, it's often the kid picked last on the team who scores the winning goal or correctly spells, "Laodician."

Unexpected people doing God's work is a common motif in the Bible.

- Moses, the stutterer, sent to convince Pharaoh to let his people go.
- David, the youngest son of Jesse, anointed the most celebrated King of Israel.
- Mary, the peasant woman from a backwater town, chosen to bear for the world a Savior, who himself would be the stone that the builder rejected, which has become the cornerstone.

If only the crowd had only paid less attention to who was speaking, and more attention to what was being said, they might have heard some good news that day.

QUESTION NUMBER TWO:

2. "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

Note what the crowd didn't say...they didn't say, "How is it that *they speak*, each of *them*," but "how did *we* hear, each of *us*." For the crowd, it's all about *them*.

A while back I read a Sports Illustrated article, by whom, and about whom, I cannot recall. Memorable article, it was. But I do remember one quote. A coach was instructing his players how to greet their families after a long road trip. I'm paraphrasing, but the gist of it was this. When his players walked through their front door, they were not to say, "I'm home," but "you're here!"

It's the difference between lingering in the foyer to await your welcome-home-hug and running down the hall to smother the first person you see with your affection.

On Pentecost, the crowd was full of an "I'm home!" mentality. No wonder they didn't grasp what was happening in front of them.

This is why calling this day "the birthday of the church" may not be such a good idea, because then the thing we're celebrating is ourselves. We're waiting in the foyer for our hug, and the miracle of the Holy Spirit is somewhere else in the house.

QUESTION NUMBER THREE: It's the million dollar question, the very one that at this very moment, hundreds if not thousands of preachers are trying to answer:

What does this mean???

A miracle has happened: the sound of rushing wind, divided tongues as of fire, a cacophony of good news spoken and heard.

From the miracle, the crowds want meaning. They want the point.

Their desire is understandable, but it makes no sense.

Consider this. Many of you in this sanctuary have a real hard time hearing us when we speak. If the Spirit suddenly filled this place in such a way that restored full hearing to your ears, would your first response be,

“What does this mean?” I hope not. You would listen! You would enjoy hearing, not worry about understanding it.

When humans encounter mystery, we want to codify it; assign meaning. There has to be a “point”, and it must be well understood. To understand, is to control.

But on Pentecost, no one is in control, but the Spirit. The disciples can take no credit for their fluency in foreign tongues, any more than the listeners can take credit for their hearing it. The disciples don’t “have” the Spirit...they are filled BY it.

Can’t the Spirit of Pentecost be something we celebrate, even if we can’t understand it? Could it be that this story remains with us, precisely because it eludes us?

What I really am talking about here is how we orient ourselves towards faith.

Our Book of Confessions, which a cynic might say is the Presbyterian attempt to codify the miraculous, has this to say about faith:

“Faith is the gift of God: a pure gift which God alone of his graces gives” (Second Helvetic Confession, 5.113).
“Our faith and its assurance do not proceed from flesh and blood, that is to say, from natural powers within us, but are the inspiration of the Holy Ghost” (Scots Confession, 3.12).

Hear that? We do not have faith, faith has us. Faith is not something we hold onto, but a gift that holds onto us.

Indeed, ours is a faith seeking understanding. This is why we have a great library adjacent to our sanctuary. This is why we have an 8-month confirmation class, and excellent adult-ed offerings. All help us with the vocabulary and diction of faith. BUT! We have to give ourselves permission sometimes NOT to understand. Not to grasp.

The crowd asks a handful of questions. I’ll ask a few of my own:

If everything is within our grasp, would there be anything left to hold onto?

If faith is something that we hold onto, then can that faith grow? Can a child become an adult if her parents never let go of her hands?

If everything were understood, would there be anything new under the sun? Would we have good news to share, or just the same news, and would that be good?

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I’m not going to tell you what Pentecost means, because I want Pentecost to have meaning for you.

- I want you to hear the voices of Spirit-filled people, not have you caught up in who is doing the speaking.
- I want you out of the foyer, and running into the house.

- I want you to let go, so that you can be still and know that the Lord is God. (Psalm 46)

Pentecost...

We just don't get it.

It's got us.

Let's celebrate.

Amen...