

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander  
**I John 4: 19-5:5**  
**“Help Has Arrived”**  
Day of Pentecost  
**May 24, 2015**

Can you imagine what it must have been like in that room? Have you ever felt the presence of God in such a tangible way? Luke describes a sound from heaven like the rush of a violent wind – and divided tongues – as of fire – appearing on each of the disciples. Luke cannot adequately describe the event – much like the visions of God that are recorded by the prophets – the author searches for words in our limited language to describe the indescribable. Something significant was taking place – something unique – something new! But not everyone could see it. As a matter of fact – some thought the disciples had just been drinking too much! But Peter - the disciple who had denied Jesus and who had run away in fear at the crucifixion – stood up – filled with the Holy Spirit – and interpreted through the eyes of faith – the events that were taking place. And this is what he said...

Read Acts 2:14b-21

<sup>14b</sup> “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.’

Peter went on to tell the crowds about Jesus – about his death and resurrection, about how he was the promised Messiah – and about the gift of the Holy Spirit that was poured out upon the people fulfilling the promise that Jesus had made to them. Peter invited the crowds to place their faith in Jesus as both Lord and Messiah, to repent of their sins and to be baptized in

the name of Jesus. And about 3000 people were added to their community that day ...just slightly larger than our most recent new member's class.

Pentecost – also known as the Feast of Weeks – is one of the mandatory festival observances for Jews. Traditionally it was a harvest festival that took place in the spring, 50 days after Passover. Devout Jews gathered from all over to give thanks for God's provision and for the harvest that had come. In our story from Acts, we find Peter interpreting the events of the day as a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy – when the Spirit of the Lord was poured out upon all people. The Spirit broke down barriers and broke open doors to bring about salvation for all. The Spirit ushered in a new movement of God that would mobilize men and women of faith to be the Body of Christ and to proclaim with one united voice the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ for the whole world!

But this grand plan would take time. And alas, Paul would remind the church that in the midst of living out its calling it would have to endure suffering. Just prior to this passage he told the Roman Christians that if they were children of God then they were also heirs along with Christ and therefore would be glorified as Christ is glorified. But if God's children are to be glorified then they must also be able to suffer along with Christ. And even though this suffering cannot compare to the glory that is coming – it is, nevertheless, real. Paul doesn't sugar coat it. Suffering is a part of the Christian life. In fact...all of creation is subject to it. Suffering is experienced by the whole creation as it wrestles with the effects of sin and death.

You may have heard about or read about a woman who has started her own business selling *Empathy Cards*. Years after her own battle with cancer, Emily McDowell decided to put on paper what she had learned from her experience being sick. She tells of how so many well meaning people would say things that sounded terrible to her and were not in the least bit helpful during her illness. She said this just made her feel more lonely and isolated from people. The Empathy Cards she sells don't sugar coat things and they don't try to find easy answers for the suffering that people endure – they simply show that the giver of the card is there with them and is willing to listen and to walk with them as best they can.

One card simply says – "I'm really sorry I haven't been in touch. I didn't know what to say." Another says, "Please let me be the first to punch the next person who tells you everything happens for a reason. I'm sorry you're going through this."

Whether you believe this or not isn't the point...the point is, that the person who is suffering needs someone to be with them...not to offer them answers. Even when the cause of a person's suffering is obvious, it rarely is helpful to point that out. If it is obvious to you then it is probably obvious to them as well.

Paul acknowledges the hard truth - suffering is a part of our world. It touches the entire creation – it touches us individually and communally. The creation groans in suffering as it is raped of its resources...as its water and air are polluted...and as species of flora and fauna dwindle towards extinction. We groan as our bodies age and wear down and fail us. As sickness and disease invade us we groan for freedom from pain and disability. As we wait with loved ones who are hurting we groan. We groan as our relationships suffer the effects of brokenness. We groan for love lost and when forgiveness seems far away. We groan when our lives become more ruled by selfishness and pride than by love and generosity and humility. We groan when

our systems fail us as people lose the ability to work together. When war and poverty and terror seize our neighbors in the world around us, we groan! When our men and women go into battle and offer themselves for the sake of their country and their most deeply cherished beliefs, we groan!

And in the midst of all this groaning – the person of faith cries out to God and in that cry the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf and communicates our struggle to God. And God, who searches our heart, hears our prayer – our inward groaning – even when we are not able to discern that we are praying at all.

Paul uses the language of both child birth and adoption. Our waiting for God to fulfill God's promise of redemption and new life is like the pain of child birth. You know, we have three beautiful children but I don't know what it's like to give birth. I have been told it is really painful. I have also been told, that for many, when a child finally arrives, the pain of the birthing experience fades as you embrace this new life and cradle it in your arms. This is how Paul describes what God is doing in us...bringing about a new life. And the pain of that birthing process will fade away when the glory of that new life is fully revealed.

Some people can relate to the image of giving birth. Others may relate to the image of adoption. Waiting is a part of adoption as well. You might not think of it as a painful experience but consider the story of our good friends Beth and Derek Barnes.

They decided several years ago to adopt a child. At first they began to work with an agency in Vietnam but after two years the country closed its doors to international adoptions and they had to look elsewhere. They were crushed but picked themselves up and began the process again – this time in Nepal. They waited and waited and waited. Beth told me that she would call the agency every Monday to find out whether any progress had been made in matching them with a child. And every week she would find some way to deal with the waiting. She bought a dog as a distraction. She would go and get her hair done. She would go shopping. Anything to take her mind off of the waiting. She held on to hope trusting that this was God's plan and that everything was going to work out. But after another two years the hope began to fade. She let her paperwork for the adoption go out of date and she and her husband decided that they would stop the search. But then one day the phone rang and the agency told them that they had a match.

Derek was shocked because he thought they had stopped the search but Beth had never actually told the agency. Deep inside she was still hoping for a child and she had never made the call to the agency to tell them to stop looking. Perhaps this was the Holy Spirit groaning for her – inwardly calling to God with sighs too deep for words. When Derek saw the picture of their new daughter, Reshma, he told Beth, “she is the most beautiful little girl I've ever seen.”

To this day Beth is convinced that God picked Reshma out just for them. During the process of adoption there was a great deal of waiting, and suffering, and hoping for what would one day be but it wasn't until their little girl was at home with them that they knew that the adoption was complete.

Paul teaches us that it is the Holy Spirit who helps us as we journey toward the vision and the purpose that God has for us in Jesus Christ. In the midst of our suffering, the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words to communicate our pain and our prayer to the Lord of Heaven and Earth.

I saw an interesting commercial the other day for a company that specializes in Wind Energy. The piece features a large man all dressed in black who is being interviewed. The man's name is *Wind*. He talks about how he has been misunderstood. People don't always like him...they are often annoyed by the effect that he has on them – blowing their hat off their head or blowing their canopy over or messing up their hair. But one day someone decided to listen to him and to take time to get to know him and to embrace him for what he could offer them and suddenly he became useful to them.

Scripture in several places describes the Spirit as WIND. In ACTS – Luke describes the Spirit's presence like the sound of the rush of a VIOLENT wind. And we are invited to embrace this one who enters into our lives and embodies the presence and power of God. Our failure to do so keeps us from the very hope that we are meant to have in Christ.

Paul tells us in Romans 8:26 that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.” The word translated *help* means “to come along side offering support.” In our time of need the Holy Spirit comes along side of us to assist us – taking hold and guiding us where we need to go. In this way – the Spirit came at Pentecost to birth the early church – the followers of Jesus – who were lost and uncertain about their next steps. The Spirit was there to inspire them to proclaim God's mighty deeds to the people who were in Jerusalem that day. Many came to faith upon hearing this proclamation. What will the Holy Spirit do in our midst? What mighty work will the Spirit do in us and in our church?

God's vision is being realized in us and we must not give up hope. We are called to fling wide open the doors - welcoming all people without prejudice. God says there is room for everyone! Invite them to come and experience the wonder of God's majesty and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are called to proclaim to the ends of the earth – in whatever language and by whatever means – that Jesus Christ is Lord – in a way that people can understand and comprehend.

If people need to hear the good news in Spanish then vamos a hablar sobre el amor de Jesu Cristo en espanol.

If people need to hear the good news in Sign Language then tell them Jesus loves them.  
(Use Signs)

If people need to hear the good news through acts of service, then feed them, house them, cloth them, give them something to drink, give them a ride, give them time.

If people need to hear the good news through technology then let's use our computers and our smart devices and our apps and our A/V equipment to tell the story of God's love.

If people need to hear the good news through music then lets raise our voices and instruments in praise to Almighty God.

Whether we are speaking in a language that children understand or one that makes sense to older adults, may we know that Help Has Arrived! The Holy Spirit is here to help us in our weakness as we journey on towards realizing God's vision for the church and for the world.

**To God be the Glory! Amen.**

**LITANY**