

Unleashed

Acts 2:1-21

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

"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.

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

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

The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

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Today is Pentecost Sunday. Traditionally, Pentecost Sunday is kind of like the birthday for the Church. Pentecost is the Greek name for a Jewish festival (which is why – as you will hear in our reading – so many Jews were in Jerusalem). The word means “fiftieth” – thus, as Christians, we celebrate Pentecost 50 days after Easter (counting both Easter and Pentecost) every year.

That’s the history of the day. Here’s where we are in the biblical story: Jesus has been crucified, buried, and resurrected. He has appeared to various disciples. He then instructs his disciples to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit that will fill them with power. As he give the disciples those instructions, Jesus ascends into heaven and the disciples commence with their waiting – hoping they will notice when the Spirit comes.

I am reading from the second chapter of Acts. Listen with me for the word of God.

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I want to start this Pentecost sermon with a story about an extraordinary start to what seemed like a very ordinary day.

On a Monday in April, my drive to work started as usual. I wrestled my three youngest kids into their car seats – making sure everyone had their pacy, their baby doll, and their Thomas the Tank Engine. With the car seats buckled and the children confined to one place, I breathed a sigh of relief and settled in for the 15-minute drive down Randolph Road heading into town.

It was raining that day – so traffic was a little more chaotic than normal. When I crossed Wendover Road, I thought I felt something under my seat. “That’s strange,” I said to myself. When I passed the Mint Museum, I felt it again. Then, as I came upon Presbyterian Hospital, there was no mistaking that something was moving under my seat. I peered down between my legs to watch - much to my surprise – a bird fly out into the cabin on the car.

If you have ever wondered how your pastor behaves when he is frightened, it may (or may not) surprise you to know that I screamed like a little girl, which was funny, because my 2 ½ year old little girl and her twin brother who were sitting in the back seat were not screaming. They were laughing and saying, “ooohh! Look Daddy! A birdie! Nice birdie!”

It was only by God’s grace that I did not run my car into oncoming traffic. My mind raced. What if this thing started pecking my children? I’d seen Alfred Hitchcock; I knew what birds could do. How was I going to get the thing out? Stay calm, I told myself – children can sense it when their parents panic.

As I looked in my rearview mirror to try to get over into the right lane and get off the busy road, I saw the bird perched on Tyler’s knee. Then I ducked my head as it

flew once more throughout the cabin of the car and landed on the headrest in between my twins' car seats. I swear the thing winked at me.

Finally, I hooked a right on Hawthorne in front of the hospital and parked on the side of the road. I opened up the back gate, all the doors, jumped out of the car (into the pouring rain), grabbed my umbrella and began to thrash around under the seats to make sure the bird had vacated the vehicle. I never actually saw the bird fly away, and so – sopping wet – I got back in the driver's seat and drove the last mile or so to the church with my tailgate open...just in case.

When I calmed down later that morning I thought back to how in the world that bird could have gotten into my car. As I traced my steps, I realized that the day before – while unloading some groceries into the house – I had left my door open in between trips to and from the kitchen. My door might have been open for two minutes – but that's all it took for the little bundle of feathered excitement to make its way into my life.

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There are a lot of different ways the Bible describes the third person of the Trinity – as in, not the Father, not the Son, but the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Bible calls the Spirit the “Advocate.” Other times it is “a mighty wind.” Still more, however, the Bible describes the Holy Spirit in the form of a bird. It's true. At Jesus baptism – the Spirit descended upon him like a dove. When Noah and his family needed assurance that they could exit the ark, a dove brought them back an olive branch. Look through your art history books – in painting after painting the Holy Spirit lights on the canvass in the shape of a bird.

If that bird inside my car was the Holy Spirit, I'm certain I was too terrified to have figured out what the Spirit had to say, but – much like that bird in my Buick – when I have experienced the Holy Spirit at other times in my life it didn't take much of an opening for God to get my attention make his presence known.

One of the things I know about my life is that because I am generally too busy, too scheduled, and too wrapped up into my own agenda – I seldom make time to wait for the Holy Spirit to speak.

I wonder if that was part of the reason that Jesus commissioned his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait. Maybe Jesus knew that if his followers had instead just generated a disciple's to-do list and a communication plan and spent their energy being task-oriented then they might have actually missed the Holy Spirit when it came to call?

If there is a spiritual crisis in our time, our inability to wait and listen and watch for God to show up gets my vote for the number one spot. It's easy to blame someone

else or some other group for what ails the Church...the place to start is to look inward.

And yet, even for those of us who think we have life figured out or who don't think there is even one more minute of time we can devote to anything beyond those things that already keep us frantic – the Holy Spirit has a habit of crashing into our lives to calling us to deeper faithfulness.

That's what the Holy Spirit does.
It doesn't just interrupt our lives.
It doesn't just cause a commotion.
The Holy Spirit helps us grow.
It reveals new dimensions of God's truth and grace.
It creates a way when we think there is no way.
It gives us heals division and brings unity.

That moment when deep-seeded resentment gives way to forgiveness? That is the Holy Spirit.

The way you study a passage of scripture that you have read a hundred times before and see it in an entirely new light? That is the Holy Spirit.

That realization that your circle of friends is not as diverse as it should be? That is the Holy Spirit.

The gnawing in your gut that tells you that there is more than one bottom line? That is the Holy Spirit.

The sense that a job or a career change blends the perfect match of your passion and the world's great need? That is the Holy Spirit.

And it will make a way into our lives – even when we work hard to keep our guards up.

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On that first Pentecost – when the Holy Spirit blew through Jerusalem and jump-started the church – those that had been watching and waiting were immediately wrapped up in the life-saving work of ministry. They were the ones on fire for the sake of gospel – the ones who began the Church's continuing work of proclaiming salvation, and reaching out in compassion, and yearning for justice, and including more and more people in the household of God.

But on that first Pentecost there were others in Jerusalem, too. Some of those others were dismissive. They thought those babbling disciples were drunk.

Yet it was the other camp of people and their reaction that captures my attention. Those who – the scripture says – were “amazed and perplexed.” Those who asked one another, “what does this mean?”

I wonder how long those people asked that question.

I wonder how many of those who asked it eventually ended up getting swept up in the movement that God started right there in their presence – and how many of them missed what God was doing because they were just too cautious to jump on board.

When I bump into the Holy Spirit – or rather, when the Holy Spirit intrudes into my life – this is generally my question: “what does this mean?” I suspect I am not alone in asking it.

And I think that question is normal and healthy.

But I also know that there comes a time when we have to stop asking it.

Because there does come a time when we can no longer hold what God is doing at arm’s length.

There comes a time when we have to decide to trust – and follow – where that Spirit leads.

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