

"What Does This Mean?"
May 31, 2020 (Pentecost)
St. Paul's UCC Church
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Acts 2:1-12

When the day of Pentecost had come, they [the disciples] 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?"

This time of year, when we finally get to Pentecost, I always feel a little dizzy. For the past nearly two months, we've been on such a liturgical roller coaster!

Let's review: on a dark Friday, a little more than seven weeks ago, our Lord and Savior is crucified on a Roman cross. But three days later, on Easter morning, he leaps up out of the grave – death cannot hold him – and for forty days, he stays on the ground, in the flesh, spending time with his friends, doing signs and wonders, almost like he's wrapping up his earthly ministry. And then, ten days ago, we arrive at the Day of Ascension, the day when Jesus mysteriously ascends – or is drawn up – into heaven. The disciples are a little baffled at first (who wouldn't be?); but they snap out of it quickly enough, and they get on with their work here on earth: gathering together, worshipping God, and meeting with one another, as they wait to see what God will do next.

Waiting, gathering, worshipping, having meetings. This is what the disciples have been doing since Jesus' ascension ten days ago. Does any of this sound familiar? It's us! It's church. *Doing church*: that's what the disciples have been up to as they wait to see what God will do next.

Well, one day, the disciples are just minding their own business, going through this nice rhythm they have established of gathering, worshipping, and

having meetings, when all of a sudden, out of the blue, "there comes a sound like the rush of violent wind, and it fills the entire house where they are sitting." All of heaven breaks loose, and suddenly, the strangest thing starts happening: the disciples start speaking in other languages! Can you imagine it? But the weirdest thing is that they aren't babbling, or speaking nonsense. They're speaking real, honest-to-goodness languages. It would be like if several of us suddenly broke out in Spanish or Russian or Farsi, but had never studied a word of it.

By the way, I should mention here that there are tons of out-of-towners in Jerusalem (which is where the disciples are) when all this is happening. It's the International Festival of Harvest, so Jerusalem is teeming with faithful people from all around the world, folks who are there to celebrate God's good gifts of the fruits of the earth.

Back to the disciples. When they start speaking all these other languages, pow! miracle of miracles!, all those out-of-towners, all those Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and Mesopotamians... all those Judeans and Cappadocians, Pontians, and Asians... all those Phrygians, and Pamphylians, Egyptians, Libyans, Cyrenes, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs... *all* of those visitors, all of those strangers, can suddenly understand the disciples, perfectly! Flabbergasted and astonished, the visitors ask, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" It's incredible stuff. The disciples are speaking new languages, and everyone can understand them.

What has happened here? As scripture puts it, *What does this mean?* The disciples have just been minding their own business, simply going through their nice rhythm of gathering, worshipping, and having meetings. But on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit bursts onto the scene, and this group of disciples who all speak the same language and who all know each other so well *explodes* into a totally different kind of worship service, one like they've never seen before. It's incredible stuff. It's Holy Spirit stuff.

And it means that things will never be the same.

We tend to regard Pentecost as a one time event – something spectacular that happened to some holy saints way back when, way back in the day, a long, long time ago. But maybe it's not like that at all.

The Holy Spirit bursts into the midst of the disciples as they are doing the most ordinary things – gathering, praying, worshipping, and meeting together. And if the Holy Spirit could descend upon *this* group of people, doing *these* ordinary things, doesn't that mean that the Spirit can descend upon anyone? Anywhere? At any time? Doesn't that mean that the Spirit of Pentecost can descend upon *us*? To take it a step further, doesn't that mean that *every time we gather* in the name of Christ – whether in a building or virtually, like this – there is a possibility that we will be changed, that we will speak a new language? And that our new language will begin to draw the outsider in?

Here at St. Paul's, we already know the language. We have learned to speak "St. Paul's" pretty well. There are rules to St. Paul's that we learned a long time ago, rules so ingrained in us that we don't even have to think about them anymore. Our committee meetings, our way of worshipping, our various social gatherings... we know, and speak, this language well. Or, we have been, at least, for many years.

But if the Holy Spirit descended upon those first disciples, suddenly giving them new language and new ability, can't the Spirit do it again?

Yes!!

Friends, I see the Holy Spirit sweeping through our church, especially now. And yes, it's unruly, and it's unpredictable, and it's uncharted territory, and it's scary... and it's so very, very holy.

Over these last ten weeks, we have had to learn to speak new languages, Spirit-languages, I would venture to say. We are learning how to worship online. And not just worship, but worship meaningfully, beautifully, as we connect to one another through ways we could have never imagined: singing together from our homes, taking communion, passing the peace in our comments, praying for each other... who knew?? The Spirit is speaking, Church, and we are listening, and we starting to speak that Spirit-language too.

Over these last ten weeks, we have had to learn to reach out to one another in different ways. We call each other on the phone. We make face masks for each other and our community. We write letters! (Letters! Who even knew some of us knew how to do that??!) But here we are, learning new languages (or perhaps reviving old ones in new ways). The Spirit is speaking, Church, and we are listening, and starting to speak that Spirit-language too.

Over these last ten weeks, we are paying even more attention to who is hurting, who needs help. Who needs those masks, anyway? How do we reach out? How do we give back? We make contributions to food banks, homeless shelters. We bring meals to one another and leave them on the doorstep. The Spirit is speaking, Church, and we are listening, and starting to speak that Spirit-language too.

And, over these last ten weeks, we have had more visitors to St. Paul's than we probably have had in a long time. So many new folks are showing up to our worship, to our Song and Psalm morning meditations, to our Bible studies. Several new people a week "like" our St. Paul's Facebook page, more than I've ever seen before the pandemic hit. What is happening here? What does this mean? Well, I believe the Spirit is speaking, and we are listening... AND I believe others – visitors, so-called "strangers" – are hearing the Spirit speak through us, too. And they are showing up to hear more.

And if we keep this up, if we keep opening ourselves to God's Spirit like this, if we keep trying to learn these new languages, what could happen to us, St. Paul's? Who might we become?

I know there's grief in not being able to meet in person. I get it. I feel it, too. I miss you, I miss you in person.

But. Don't let anyone tell you that churches aren't open. Our church is perhaps more open than it ever has been in: as we let the Spirit in, as we let go of the familiar, and learn to speak new languages.

I know: it's scary, it's unknown, it's chaotic... the fire, the wind, the disruption, the strangeness – Pentecost can be a frightening thing, sometimes.

But Pentecost is also so very exciting. New languages, new opportunities, new ways of being the church. New ways of opening ourselves to God's work in the world.

God is on the move. The Spirit is on the loose. And we are listening, St. Paul's, and even learning to speak the Spirit's new language. And folks are showing up to hear it.

Only God knows what all of this means, or what this is going to mean. But I, for one, am so very excited to see what the future holds for us...

Come, Holy Spirit!

Thanks be to God!