



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Led by the Spirit

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 23, 2010

Pentecost Sunday (Year C)

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.'*

Sometime last week, I was out in the backyard with my daughter Sarah, who chose to re-enact—with great laughter, mind you—my encounter with a snake several years back. It’s funny how children remember those sorts of stories, isn’t it?

I hadn’t thought about that day in a while, but Sarah’s laughter brought it to mind, and I also remembered what had happened immediately before that great encounter.

I had been preparing to mow for the first time that year, and I had stopped in the den to put on my mowing socks on the way to the garage. But then I had gotten sucked into some show on the wildlife channel about Anacondas, those giant snakes that live in the Amazon. As I watched, a group of men waded barefoot into the murky waters so that they could “feel” the snake with their feet. While I was a bit uncertain, I started to think that, given the right circumstances and the right leaders, I might be able to do that.

Next, they reached into those murky waters and pulled out a huge Anaconda at least 18 feet long and it took seven men to lift and hold it above the waters so that the camera could show us the size of that enormous snake. “I think I could be the one there in the middle,” I thought to myself. And then I went outside to mow the lawn.

As I rounded the first corner, I jumped about 10 feet in the air. Just below my feet—a huge snake, almost a foot long lay sleeping in the grass. I wanted to catch it to show the kids, but I wasn’t barefooted and so wasn’t sure exactly where to grab it, and I didn’t have six other men with me to help me lift it up, and so I made the decision that the yard really didn’t need mowing that bad after all and I went back inside to safer environs.

I’m thankful that Sarah reminded me of that story before today—before Pentecost Sunday—because it seems to me that there is something to be learned about power in those stories, and, if you’ll give me a little time, perhaps we’ll make the connection.

As for Luke—both in his gospel and the Book of Acts—Luke makes the strong connection between Jesus’ baptism and his ministry. The power of the Spirit is the thread linking these movements together—the Spirit descends in baptism; after baptism, Jesus is filled with the Spirit; the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness; then, Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit begins to teach. Finally, when Jesus’ public ministry begins at Nazareth, this is what we hear: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...”

And Luke doesn’t finish his story of the resurrection until Pentecost. One of the features of Luke-Acts is the tension of absence and presence. Empty tomb—absence; resurrection appearances—presence; Ascension—absence; Pentecost—present in a new way in the power of the Spirit. Luke’s story of what happened on Pentecost, then, is in reality another resurrection account—the risen Jesus is now present among us in a radically new way, through the power of the Spirit.

But you’ve got to admit, it’s a strange story. When it comes to special effects, Hollywood has nothing on the church’s story of Pentecost. Try as they might, the Hollywood movers and shakers could never do justice to the church’s story of Pentecost, a story where every phrase of every sentence seems to describe something more wonderfully strange than the one before.

It’s now been nearly two thousand years since that amazing Pentecost Sunday, and we’re still trying to imagine real flames dancing over real heads, and the cacophony of sound somehow making sense. It’s a fantastic story, but let’s admit it: it’s also a story

which strains even our most-active imaginations.

So what are we, who are sitting in a modern church faced with challenges too numerous to count, to make of it? That's the question that I've struggled with in preparing for this sermon, and, to be honest, it's the same question I struggle with each year at Pentecost. How are we to understand this strangely wonderful story?

Perhaps we should ask the same question we asked last week when we were trying to understand a different story from the Book of Acts. We asked: "What's present at the end of the story that wasn't there at the beginning?" When I asked that of the church's Pentecost story, the answer jumped off the page.

At the beginning of the story, Luke tells us, there were about 120 followers of Jesus sitting in an upper room. All of them are moping around about what they were going to do without Jesus. They were a church lacking vision and purpose with little hope of survival in the political and religious culture of their time. At the beginning of the Pentecost story, the church has some people, but no power.

But jump to the end of the story. There we see a church not trapped in some upper room, but down in the streets, speaking the people's language. We see a church that added 3000 members that very day. We see a church, who Peter, quoting the prophet Joel, says is dreaming dreams and seeing visions. What we see at the end of the story is a church with power for ministry. The church struggling for survival and without a vision is suddenly "gone with the wind" as a new church blows in, a new church enlivened by the unstoppable power of God's Spirit.

As wild as its features are, the church's Pentecost story shouts a single truth: it is the Spirit of God alone who gives life to the church.

There. We've stumbled upon what we in the modern church are to make of this story. In doing so, we've also danced dangerously close to what I think is the modern church's greatest temptation, namely, to think that it is our power and our creativity and our faithfulness that moves the church. The temptation is to forget the central truth of this Pentecost story: it is the Spirit alone who gives life to the church.

We talked about this in our officer training this year. We also talked about it a bit at our staff planning retreat this past Wednesday. Even though we want to be sure to welcome, encourage, support, and call out all of our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love from each member of this community, there is always a need to recognize that it is the Spirit who really moves the church, empowering us to do things like Massanutten Cares and Sunday School and the Food Pantry and the amazing music groups that are part of this congregation.

The story of Pentecost shouts across the centuries to the modern church: "The Spirit is the power of the church." It speaks to us of power for ministry and mission. It's a frightening thing to think about trusting the Spirit and discerning the Spirit's leading instead of trusting in our own efforts. And what it takes more than anything else is a re-commitment to the study of scripture and the worship of God by this community so that we recognize the voice of God when we hear it.

In his two-part narrative, Luke has told an amazing story. In his gospel, he tells the story of all that happened when Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit. It was clear:

for Luke, everything that Jesus did—all the teaching; all the miracles—happened by the power of the Spirit.

In the Book of Acts, Luke tells the continuing story of Jesus by telling of all that the disciples did in the name of the Lord. It was clear: for Luke, everything that the church did—all the teaching; all the welcoming; the mission to the ends of the earth—the church did by the power of the Spirit.

Taken together, Luke's story of Jesus and of the early church reveals a world that is far from nailed down, where the Spirit invites bold, boundary-shattering, world-transforming ministry for the sake of the kingdom. Should we in the church today really expect anything different from this radical mission to the world God loves, if we follow where the unstoppable power of the Spirit leads?

And now, let us stand together to say what we believe:

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord.
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.**