

The St. John's Pulpit

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VISIONS & DREAMS: SONS & DAUGHTERS, YOUNG & OLD

Acts of Apostolic People 2:1-17

Pentecost, May 15, 2016
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It is always a good idea to look at what you are seeing.

Did you hear about the small town with only one full-time police officer? People complained that drivers were speeding through their little town. So, the part-time mayor asked the officer to petition the state for a radar gun. When the state refused, the officer did not inform the mayor. He just drove fourteen miles to the county seat and made a purchase. Then, he began positioning himself at a strategic location and pointing out the window of his vehicle with his new device. People slowed down and all was well. He had bought his wife a new handheld hair dryer and repurposed her old one. *It is always a good idea to look at what you are seeing.*

Almost 2,000 years ago, in the city named, Yeru-Shalom (city of peace), birds were chirping announcing the dawn of another new day. That day began like most other days. Yet, by sunset, it had become a day to be remembered throughout human history. Followers of the Way of Jesus were gathered waiting for God's gift. Jesus had told them: "*Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised...*" Let us look at what we are seeing in this story.

That new day was the 50th day after the resurrection of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost on the Jewish calendar. Pentecost, the Greek word for 'fiftieth,' was a festival commemorating the end of Jewish harvest season and the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses showing them how to live in relationship with God. Pentecost brought to these followers of the Way of Jesus a harvest of their faith in God and a new way of living by God's empowering spirit.

Notice how the storyteller in Acts tells us, "*...they were all together in one place.*" While birds chirped in the foreground, God was active in the background. God is always active in the background bringing about something new and better. Our unity does not make it happen. However, our unity makes us ready to receive God's gift of empowering spiritual Presence.

The experiences of wind and fire on the Day of Pentecost are significant. These tangible symbols of the Spirit must originate with God. Wind symbolizes the Holy Spirit as God's power. Fire represents the abiding Presence of God who comes upon us and spreads through us into the world. Because God is always at work in the background, we should open our lives for God's empowering Spirit so we listen to what we are hearing and look at what we are seeing.

We have all heard Smoky the Bear say, “*Only YOU can prevent forest fires.*” The message behind the wind and fire on Pentecost is this: *ONLY GOD CAN CREATE THE CHURCH*. We can begin organizations, institutions, groups, movements, alliances, fellowships and congregations. **However, only God can empower fruitful ministry in Jesus’ name.**

From that Day of Pentecost until today, there are many signs, wonders, miracles and events that can be explained ONLY by faith in the Holy Spirit of God.

- **If the ministry of Jesus continuing in contemporary society depends solely upon human power, we are all in big trouble.**
- **If the work of Christ’s Church has no more power than what can be generated by you and me and people like us, Christ’s Church is a farce.**
- **If the compassionate grace of The Living God can only save, heal, reconcile and redeem because our organizations and institutions are administratively healthy and financially wealthy, then God is powerless.**

On this Pentecost Sunday, let us boldly proclaim: ‘We are followers of the Way of Jesus investing our lives in St. John’s, part of the body of Christ in the world, empowered by The Holy Spirit of The Living God.’ Diverse in backgrounds, we come from various places having journeyed along a myriad of pathways. Our individual lives are so contrasting and distinctive that only the Holy One who is ineffable – indescribable – could bring us together to collaborate in the ministry of Jesus. We are like people speaking different languages, yet understanding.

On that Day of Pentecost, it was as if the United Nations began without interpreters. The Living God empowered people to understand one another. Still today, whenever and wherever people open their attitudes and character – their spirits – to the Holy Spirit of God, a deeper understanding develops, a more loving unity is experienced and a greater peace unfolds. Yet, whenever and wherever the Spirit of The Living God is denied, misunderstanding happens, bias and fear create havoc and violent hate ensues. When we really look at the other person we are seeing, the Spirit of the Living God empowers us to understand their voice and heart.

When Dr. Fred Craddock was a young minister, he served a church between Knoxville and Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He described the church in this way: ‘a small, sleepy church with a small, sleepy congregation in a small, sleepy village.’ Then, one day, excitement arrived in the village as people started talking about atomic energy. Many people began moving into the area. Some lived in tents and trailers. In a business meeting, against their pastor’s voice, the congregation passed a motion that to be a member of their church, a person had to own land in the county. Fred left soon thereafter. About forty years later, Fred and his wife, Nettie, were visiting in the area and drove by the location of that church. The parking lot was full. The people were diverse. Fred said they looked like Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia. The sign above the door of the old church read, “Bar-B-Que.” And Fred said to Nettie, “It’s a good thing this is no longer a church or all these people would not be welcome.” You see friends, when we really look at the other person we are seeing, the Spirit of the Living God empowers us to understand their voice and heart.

During a news documentary on poverty, one mother was interviewed who had nurtured her eight children into young adulthood while living in a tar paper shack. Each one of those eight young adults had finished high school and six of them completed college. All eight were making positive contributions to society. The reporter asked the mother, “How did you do it?” She smiled and said, “I kept tellin’ my children that I see a new world comin’ and I wanted them to be ready for it. I told them the world I was seein’ was bigger than I could describe. But, I kept tellin’ ‘em that they needed to get ready.’

When you really look at this story in Acts 2, you see God’s Spirit beginning a new and bigger world; landing on people who were older and younger. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was probably there that day. She would have been an older adult at the time – somewhere in her late 40s or early 50s. John Mark who wrote the first Gospel would have been present. He would have been a teenager. Simon Peter was there; he had denied knowing Jesus less than two months earlier. Thomas was there; he had looked at Jesus’ wounds to restore his belief. The women who had followed Jesus and helped cover the expenses of Jesus’ ministry were there.

Upon hearing and seeing all of this, the Jerusalemites said, “*They are filled with new wine.*” The *Jerusalem Observer*, may have read, “*Drunken Mob Follows the Way of Jesus.*”

Simon Peter stepped forward to defend the followers of Jesus saying, “*You are partly correct. Though they are not drunk, it is only 9 AM; they have discovered New Wine. And this New Wine will not do well in the old wineskins of legalism, bias, fear, and prejudice. This New Wine, which Jesus brings, moves us beyond listening to one another or seeing one another as merely Parthians, Medes, Red, Black, Cisgender, Democrat, Republican, homosexual, Elamite, transgender, White, Buddhist, Yellow, male, female, leper, heterosexual, married, special needs, homebound, adopted, poor, addict, co-dependent, rich, sober, single, caregiver, teacher, athlete, administrator, lawyer, fireman, police officer, homemaker, human resource officer, consultant, entrepreneur, artist, construction engineer, loan officer, doctor, nurse, banker, professor, truck driver, shop owner, preschool worker, musician, property manager, sales representative, homeless, student, dancer, instrumentalist, airline employee, architect, counselor, youth, educated, depressed, retired, alcoholic, immigrant, adulterer, lame, divorced, blind, parent, tax collector, fishermen, harlot, Samaritan, Jew, Greek, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, etc. This New Wine which Jesus brings empowers us to listen to what we are hearing in the lives of one another and empowers us to look at what we are seeing. We experience wind and fire.*”

The Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff, suggests we are living in “...a privileged time.” Today, Church, as we have known it, is being thoroughly refashioned – re-imagined. For some people, these times are frightening, painful, difficult and challenging. Yet, for St. John’s, these times are renewing, exciting, empowering, energizing. In the life and ministry of St. John’s, we pursue visions and dreams as we listen to what we are hearing from our sons and daughters, young and old. May God empower us with discernment so we listen to what we hear and look at what we see for the sake of the Gospel as we drink the New Wine of Jesus! Amen & AMEN!