

Watching for the Spirit

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Acts 2: 1-21

One of the miracles of Pentecost is that with all the strange things going on that day, people stayed: they watched, they spoke, they listened. If they had had any sense they would have run off screaming in terror: strange sounds, windy noises, fire, multitudinous languages. Why stick around when such bizarre, inexplicable things are happening?

According to Acts, after his resurrection Jesus is with the disciples for 40 days (Biblical shorthand for a long time). In his new life, Jesus continues to teach about the reign of God. And he gives explicit instructions for his followers to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit to come upon them. John gave them baptism by water, but now they will receive the Spirit.

Jesus promises that this is a new kind of power. They immediately want to know, of course, what the power will be like. Is this the time, now, for the overthrow of Rome? Will Israel finally be restored to its rightful place?

Jesus reminds them that that is not the kind of power he's talking about. This is holy power, Holy Spirit power. It works in a whole different way. It is not just about Israel, this is a power that extends the message of the reign of God even to those places with which Israel has had generations of conflict — Judea, Samaria and beyond — to the whole world!

Whether or not they're disappointed with that reminder we don't know, but after Jesus disappears in a cloud they do go to Jerusalem — and wait — as they were instructed.

Now it has been 10 days since Jesus told them to wait. They are more than ready to go home to Galilee, but instead they all hang around in Jerusalem waiting, watching for signs of this promised Holy Spirit. Day 10 happens to be the Jewish harvest festival of Shavuot; it is the celebration of God giving Israel the Ten Commandments. So on this day they wait and watch, together, in one large room. Luke, the writer of Acts, doesn't give us many details of the day, just the Spirit's arrival sounding like a violent wind, looking like tongues of flame.

Perhaps when they heard the loud sound they remembered Elijah waiting for God in the storm, in the whirlwind, in the noise.

Maybe when they saw the tongues of flame on each other's heads they remembered Moses and the burning bush, God in the flame that did not devour. Then suddenly the scene changes and the group of Spirit watchers is outside and each begins speaking in a different language, in languages they do not know. But the people outside, the people on the street, understand them. On this day, Jewish "people from every nation under heaven" are in Jerusalem. They have been scattered to all corners of the empire, so they speak many different languages. But today they are in Jerusalem, to celebrate receiving the Law. And to everyone's surprise, they receive the Holy Spirit. Sometimes in the synagogue these visitors to Jerusalem struggle to understand what is being said. But here, on the street, they understand what these people are saying. They understand the praise, the preaching, the stories about the reign of God. And it is all

recognizable in the languages from Cappadocia and Phrygia, from Mesopotamia and Pontus, even in the languages of the converts.

Some people are turned off, are skeptical; they have no idea what is being said, but they can see who it is that is saying it. It is those hicks from Galilee, the uneducated and uncouth, who are speaking these many languages. And since these observers have ears — but do not hear — they think that the crazy Galileans must be drunk.

Up steps Peter. The one who betrayed Jesus, who said he was first in faithfulness and yet fled when things got dangerous. But this time Peter does not hide, he stands tall defending his people and his God.

Out of all this chaos Peter brings order. He clarifies what is happening. The gathering crowd has no point of reference, they don't know about waiting and watching for the Spirit. The Jews gathered from all nations surely understand about Elijah, they most certainly know about Moses receiving the law, even the tower of Babel. But Peter doesn't go there.

Instead, Peter reminds them of the more obscure prophet, Joel, who wrote of just such a time, when the unexpected and totally impossible happen. When dreams and visions are not just for prophets, but for everyone: girls and boys, women and men, slave and free, old and young. Peter reminds them that this is what the reign of God looks like. All people receive the Spirit; even nature shows signs that God is present, that the Spirit is alive, and at work.

It has now been 40 days plus 10 for us since we marked the resurrection, since we celebrated once again that love has the final word; life is stronger than death. What

is happening in our life together that teaches us about the reign of God, that points us toward the power of the Holy Spirit?

It is the rare week when I am not asked how things are going in the congregation, by one of you or by a friend outside the church. From the outside, to someone who doesn't understand the many languages we speak, it might look like our current life together is as chaotic as that first Pentecost.

I am not sure we could have more things in flux than we do: a vacancy on the pastoral team; the retirement of Annabelle, keeper of institutional memory; after 20 years of talking we are renovating the building to make it accessible; we are worshipping in a neighboring building for eight months; Allegheny Conference which disciplined us seven years ago now wants to explore reconciliation. Are we drunk, taking on all of this at the same time?

No, my friends, we are not drunk. It may look like confusion, but the Spirit is at work. Peter Goering has agreed to chair the pastoral search committee and the church council is assembling that group. This week we will welcome Justin Yoder, a summer ministry intern. Demolition has begun on the building, and I am assured reconstruction will be completed by the beginning of December. And our process with Allegheny Conference has already gotten some press. We must move forward trusting that the Spirit will be at work in that situation and in those relationships.

Certainly the Spirit is at work in our corporate times together. The Sunday after Easter we said good-bye to Adam, Maria and Ezra. Last year on Pentecost Sunday Adam was ordained into ministry. Now he is preparing to pursue new ministry options in Goshen, Indiana. The Spirit helped us, as a congregation, to create a new pastor.

I glimpsed the reign of God recently when we heard from Andy Stoner, one of the hosts at the International Guest House. What a gift that people from all over the world — and those who volunteer at the Guest House — experience hospitality at this “home away from home.” Might the Spirit be nudging some of us to become more aware of and involved with the ministry of the Guest House?

On Disability Awareness Sunday, staff and clients from Jubilee Association shared about their lives with Jesus. We were powerfully reminded that our disabilities are no hindrance to the reign of God or the work of the Spirit. We only need to step out of the way and let love give us eyes to see God in each other and in ourselves. We have been invited by the Race Matters group to reflect personally on the racism that is so endemic and destructive in our society. We can make choices in our relationships and actions and maybe even here in the congregation, to be part of healing this gaping wound.

Last week, Reina Neufeldt testified to the power of peacemaking to transform conflict as well as transform those peacemakers who imagine they are already at peace.

Even in the small, informal things new life is present, Spirit winds are blowing. This year, three times as many people filled out and volunteered through the gift discernment process as last year. A number of families are working the soil together, planting and cultivating several small gardens in the church house yard. We are finding ways to deepen our connections with the Church of the Brethren, while they so graciously host us these next months.

These are only some of the opportunities to participate in the reign of God as it unfolds in the world. The Spirit is at work and on the move among us and with us.

I wonder what signs of the Spirit you have seen or heard.

The Jews gathered that day in Jerusalem came together to remember the giving of the law to Israel. To their surprise they were given the Spirit. Today we gather for communion. You will be given the bread and the cup, a symbol of Christ's body, his life and work. As Mennonites, we often speak of "taking" communion. Today, on Pentecost Sunday as we celebrate the coming of the Spirit, let us "receive" the bread and cup. Let us receive the Spirit.

May this meal be a reminder of God's grace and Jesus' life. May we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit with her mysterious power in us, among us and throughout the whole world.