

“God Present”

John 14: 8-17, Acts 2: 1-21

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I remember watching a documentary on the great hurricane that hit Galveston, TX in the late 19th century. It is hard to imagine how helpless the people felt as they rode out this horrendous storm. Perhaps we *can* imagine after watching Hurricane Katrina unfold on national television. One hundred years ago the technology did not exist to forecast such storms. They could only monitor barometric changes and observe other meteorological shifts. They communicated warnings by telegraph and went door to door to warn people of the storm’s approach. I remember that the storm arrived more quickly than they thought it would and many people were reluctant to leave. They thought they could ride it out as they had done before. They were mistaken and when the storm came ashore it decimated the entire community.

Even though we have more sophisticated technology, so many people today live with a similar false sense of security. We put our trust in weather channel reporters, storm chasers and hurricane predictors that tell us how to prepare and when to be worried. There are still people who do not heed the warnings. There are still others, like our sisters and brothers a century ago, who do not have the ability to escape a storm regardless of the technology we have to predict it. All the technology in the world can not make us leave our homes when real danger is imminent. Often we listen to that voice telling us to stay put when it is prudent to pick up and go.

The closest I have ever come to a hurricane is during hurricane Andrew, more than 12 years ago. I remember being in Florida on vacation one August while I was in seminary. We drove 16 hours to East Coast of Florida for a week of rest before the new semester began. By the end of the week, they were predicting the arrival of a strong hurricane. We decided to batten down the storm shutters and head back north a day early. Thankfully our exit was toward permanent safety. Hutchinson Island, where we were staying was on the outer edge of the storm and was largely spared. However, it was frightening to realize that you were on the road that Saturday with hundreds of people who were escaping real danger and who returned home to find real devastation. The power that hurricanes and tornadoes and tsunamis unleash is very real and never to be taken lightly.

Today we hear of a different kind of power that God unleashed thousands of years ago. If you have ever lived through such a devastating storm this morning's account of Pentecost might sound eerily familiar. Today we finally transition from the fifty days of Easter to the season of Pentecost. As Christians, we celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the Church because it was on this day, as Jesus promised, that the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit. But before Pentecost was a Christian celebration, it was an important day in the Jewish faith. That is why so many people were gathered together in Jerusalem. The word Pentecost means 50 days, and was celebrated 50 days after Passover. For Jews, it was a harvest celebration, but it was also celebrated to commemorate the day Moses received the commandments from God. Today, Judaism names this day Shavuot (shuh-voo-aught).

Before Jesus' death, he promised not to leave his disciples alone. He promised that his death would not be an ending, but a beginning. In fact, he tells them he will send the Holy Spirit, to be present to them all the days of their lives, to encourage, guide, comfort and love them in his absence. He instructs them that it is now time for them to carry on his ministry. In fact, he insists they will do more and greater things than even he has accomplished. Who could have imagined it? More miracles, more healing, more loving, more bringing together people whom have been left out, more speaking the truth that changes lives. What Jesus has done will pale in comparison to what they will accomplish, so says Jesus to his disciples.

After the crucifixion, when the disciples thought all was lost, Jesus appeared to them time and again over the course of forty days. He ate with them and continued to teach them and encourage them for the time when he would be gone for good. Then, after 40 days, Jesus ascends into heaven, leaving his disciples once and for all. He tells them to go and wait for what is to happen next. So, the disciples gather in another upper room, this time with many more believers. We are told there were 120 people there, waiting, for what they were not exactly sure.

It isn't hard to imagine what might have been going through their minds as they waited all those days and hours: the retold the stories Jesus told them, the miracles and healings they witnessed, the conflicts he had stirred up with the Pharisees. They must have wondered as they waited there, "what now? What is this thing we are waiting for? When will it come, what will it mean?"

When can I get back to my life? What will it mean tomorrow?” And then, as they waited and wondered and worried, the miracle we call Pentecost was unleashed on them.

Our scripture today is the account of that miracle. As they were praying and waiting together, suddenly there was a violent wind and tongues of fire, and they were speaking languages they had not learned. Everything that happened was as sign of God’s presence in there midst. The wind was a sign of power, fire a sign of purity, and tongues came so they could share this Good News with everyone and they would be understood! On this amazing day, those faithful and fear-filled disciples were swept away by the power of God. Then God sent them out into the world, an unsuspecting, waiting world, to share this amazing Good News.

God chose this moment because God knew there would be no better time or place to send the Holy Spirit than to those gathered to celebrate Pentecost. It took a mighty wind, a moment that could not be missed or dismissed to capture their attention. How quick we are to try to find some reasonable explanation for what happened. Ah, they must be drunk on new wine! God made it perfectly clear that this new thing was intended for all people, that is why they speak in every language imaginable. That is why Peter quotes the prophet Joel to remind them that God promised long ago that young and old, slave and free would speak freely and dream dreams and have powerful visions that would change the world.

This is the gift of Pentecost, from the very beginning; God excluded no one. Any restrictions, rules or boundaries that seem to keep you from being part of God’s blessed community are not of God. If you have ever felt excluded or unwelcome or inadequate or unworthy of sharing your gifts it is because one of us has made you feel that way, and then must name that sin and seek God’s forgiveness to be healed of it. There are no restrictions or limitations or criteria to follow Jesus except a willingness to love all of God’s creation and to share the Good News with whoever may receive it.

The Holy Spirit is truly an amazing gift. Each one of us has probably had an experience of the Spirit at one time or another even if we could not name it as such. When we have found the words to speak in a challenging moment, perhaps that is our good fortune, or perhaps it was the work of the Holy Spirit. When you have been compelled to call a friend, you aren’t quite sure why, perhaps that is the work of the Holy Spirit. When you open the Bible

in a moment of crisis and find yourself reading precisely the words that bring you comfort, perhaps that too is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is at work in our lives every day. We just don't always recognize it.

The Pentecost story is an evangelism story. Now we need not be afraid of this word "evangelism." It simply means sharing the Good News. The world needs to hear how the Spirit is at work in your life. Those who struggle to find meaning and purpose in their lives want to know why believing in Jesus Christ makes a difference to you. Good deeds can sometimes say more than words, but a powerful, sincere story can change a person's life. The Pentecost story is nothing more than an historical footnote, if we do not share our own encounters with the Holy Spirit.

David Gallimore believes witnessing, sharing with others our encounters with the Holy One, is the essence of the Pentecost message. He says "if we are not allowing the Holy Spirit to empower us for witness, then nothing else we do as a church will matter anyway. If we fail in our mission as a church, it will not be because of a lack of ministries. It won't be a lack of leadership. It won't be a lack of finances. It won't be a marketing problem or an image problem. If we fail, it will be a failure to allow the Holy Spirit to move us and empower us as proclaimers of the gospel to our world." As frightening as it may seem at first, when you muster the courage to tell your stories, the Holy Spirit will give you the language to speak and will also prepare the hearts of others to receive our message. We don't all have the same story to tell, nor do we always speak the same language. That is the gift of Pentecost. Even though we speak in many languages, our witness is meant to unify rather than divide.

Pentecost is still happening. That wind you hear is not an approaching storm. It is the Holy Spirit clearing the way for you to do a new thing, to speak a new truth, to love more deeply and share your stories more passionately in the name of the One who came so we could not only have life, but have it more abundantly. The disciples spoke in many languages, so that everyone could hear and understand. Find your language and share your story. What you have to say just might change the world. May it be so, on this day of Pentecost and every day! Amen