

“TODAY IS THE DAY”

Acts 2:1-18

May 31, 2020 ~ Pentecost

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

When we come to a passage of scripture, and ask “how can this speak to us?” we start by reading and studying the text to see what it says. Then we try to understand something about the situation described in the text or the circumstances surrounding its writing. Who were the people involved and what were they grappling with? We also consider *our* circumstances; what’s going on in our lives or our world? What’s shaping the perspective we bring to our study? And then we ask ourselves: how are these circumstances alike? What do we share with those people of the Bible? What’s different?

I admit that, on re-reading the Pentecost story this week, the first thing I noticed was that the disciples were all together in one place.

Aha. Well, that’s clearly different.

I wondered for a moment if a Pentecost sermon was just going to be a non-starter this year.

But a glance back at the first chapter of Acts offered some helpful context: After Jesus’ ascension, his disciples went back to Jerusalem: the eleven remaining apostles, some of the women disciples, Jesus’ mother and brothers all hung out for a while in that upper room where they’d gathered before. They had a meeting with a larger group of Jesus’ disciples to “fill a vacancy” among the leaders, but other than that, all they apparently did was wait and pray.

This seems to be, in fact, what they are doing as today’s story begins. Waiting and praying.

Ok. That seems more familiar.

While they waited and prayed, I wonder if they were remembering Jesus’ promise that the Holy Spirit would come to them.

I wonder if they knew what that meant.

I wonder if they asked, “how long?”

I wonder if they thought, “today might be the day!”

I wonder if they were anxious about the future.

I wonder if they could have imagined what changes they'd see and how many challenges they'd face, the amazing things they'd witness, what would be asked of them, how they would change, or what their community would become.

I wonder if maybe they weren't a lot like us after all.

Like us, those early disciples faced a lot of uncertainty. They had nothing very great in the way of resources. They probably had grave doubts about their own abilities. They'd formed this connection with each other around a Person and a mission they believed in, but whether there was a future in it remained to be seen.

Unlike them, we know that change and challenge, ups and downs, have been part of the story of the Christian community for 2000 years. There have been instances of grace and triumph – healing the sick and relieving poverty, preserving knowledge, speaking truth, producing art and music to the glory of God, celebrating sacred moments, helping people to know God and find meaning and follow Jesus. There have also been plenty of times when the church has chosen destructive paths: promoting wars and conquest and racism; cozying up to power; excluding instead of welcoming; loving “forms of religion” more than people; and sometimes just being too lazy and getting too complacent.

Unlike those early believers, we have been steeped in skepticism, shaped by a culture of individualism, and regularly confronted with the suggestion that we don't *really* need God. It's commonplace for us to hear, even from people who consider themselves believers, that religion is no longer relevant and we don't need church.

The challenges, then and now, for a community of people waiting and praying, and wanting to be faithful, are real. The way is uncertain. It's an uphill slog at times. There are tough decisions, conflicts within and without, needs and troubles to be dealt with, a million things to learn, hard work, and always our own brokenness getting in the way. And occasionally things happen that we couldn't have predicted.

But. But today is Pentecost; today is the day we affirm church.

Today is the day we remember that we are part of this thing because God's Spirit has blown into our lives.

Today is the day we take notice of how the Spirit fills our senses with the goodness of God – in the wind, the flames, the sun, the freshness after rain, music, air, earth.

Today is the day we pause to think about how much the gifts of table, font, and book mean to us.

Today is the day we celebrate community.

Today is the day we say how much we need – and cherish – each other.

Today is the day we give thanks for a faith community that weeps with us when we weep, rejoices with us when we rejoice, and prays for us all the time.

Today is the day we say how good it is that sisters and brothers in Christ can be united by the Spirit into one church, despite many differences.

Today is the day we rejoice in the beautiful diversity of the people of God.

Today is the day we affirm the visions and dreams of women and men, young and old, who have been called by the Spirit to serve and lead the church.

Today is the day we praise the Spirit that transcends boundaries of language, race, class, and nation.

Today is the day we take a moment to appreciate the beautiful patchwork of different gifts the Spirit has given to God's people: from teaching to leadership, from compassionate listening to organization, from music to service, from prayer to technology.

Today is the day we know that the Spirit of God is among and within us.

Today is the day we put our trust in the Spirit as we wait and pray.

Today is the day we are grateful for Spirit-filled words of pardon, welcome, and hope.

Today is the day we take courage to speak Spirit-filled words in defense of truth and justice.

Today is the day we hear the Spirit of God who breathes life into all God's children cry out for justice with those who cannot breathe for the weight of racism upon them.

Today is the day we are thankful for the Spirit's presence with us even through the darkest and most difficult of times.

Today is the day we claim the Spirit's power as the strength beyond our strength, the wind beneath our wings, the fire that moves us from apathy to action.

Today is the day we open our fearful hearts again to the Spirit, even not knowing what's next.

Today is the day we rediscover the freedom of the Spirit that "blows where it will," never mind our expectations or reluctance.

Today is the day we remember we have a message and a mission – to look beyond the circle of the church and see who is there, and to share the love of Jesus with them.

Today is the day we embrace the Spirit's call to be the body of Christ in the world.

Today is the day we say "yes" to the dreams and visions God's Spirit may send, "yes" to whatever unexplored horizons God may be leading us toward, "yes" to the "new thing" God is doing.

Today is the day we declare our intention to be the people whose mother-tongue is love.

Today is the day we affirm church.

There will be other days, I'm sure, when it is harder for us to discern the Spirit's presence, or to embrace a vision for ministry, or even remember why we were called into community in the first place.

But today is Pentecost. Today is the day we affirm church.

We have had to do so many things differently as a church in these past couple of months. But the important things are still the important things. We remember those things today; Today is the day we affirm church.

I don't know what the future will bring. I don't know how the church will be changed by this pandemic experience, though I'm pretty sure it will be. I don't know what new things God will have for us to learn or do, but we can be confident that we will be led into something new. And the presence and power of the Spirit of God will accompany us into that something, whatever it may be.

Pentecost promises that presence and power to the church.
This is the day we affirm church.

I hope that this day be a touchstone for those other days, for that yet-unknown future - so that God may be praised, Christ may be shared, and the Spirit that blows and crackles and sings in and around us this morning may be at work through the church – through us - in ways yet to be discovered. Amen.

Resources:

Poem: "Pentecost" by Malcolm Guite

Acts (Interpretation Commentary) by William Willimon

Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts by Matthew L. Skinner