

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
June 9, 2019, Pentecost Sunday
 Psalm 104:24-34, 35b, Acts 2: 1-21
THE SURPRISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Intro to New Testament Reading:

As we prepare to hear the story of the first Pentecost for Jesus' followers, I want to share something new I learned this week. Acts 2:1 begins with the words: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." In the past when I read this, I assumed that it was just referring to the disciples.

But several authors I read this week had another suggestion. They point to Acts 1:15 that tells of Peter standing up to speak to the believers gathered together after Jesus had ascended to heaven. This was the story we read last week. The author of Acts says that the believers gathered together numbers about 120 people at that time. Then we come to this morning's story of the Holy Spirit descending on the gathered followers of Jesus.

As you listen to this story, I invite you to not imagine the 12 male disciples, but to imagine this happening to 120 men, women and children who followed Jesus. Let yourself listen to the story of the first Pentecost with new ears: Acts 2:1-21

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, eds, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Pentecost*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018, p. 327

Have you ever had an experience in your life where you found yourself thinking, "the world will never be the same again after this?"

Several years ago, I heard the Christian author Paula D'Arcy speak. She had suffered a fall and a traumatic brain injury two years before. She told us that as she lay on the ground after the fall, she remembers thinking: "my life will be different from now on." For her it meant that this prolific author, in her early 60's, could now only write about a paragraph at a time. It took her hours to get the thoughts from her head to the page. The next book she wrote after the accident is in short paragraphs, because that was the way her brain functioned following her fall.

For you, you may have found yourself thinking "the world may never be the same again" following a car wreck or a traumatic injury or illness of your own. It may have been the life-changing birth of your child or grandchild, it may have been following a time you were attacked, or during the severe illness of someone you loved. You may have known your world was changed forever when the plane touched down in America after you left Togo behind. Or maybe when you met and fell in love with your spouse or partner, or you served in the military, or you moved from middle school to high school, or high school to college.

There are events in life that change who we are.

In Acts chapter two this morning we hear about an event that not only changed the lives of the twelve disciples, or the 120 disciples, but also changed our lives of faith as well.

"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...."

And the world changed forever.

For those followers of Jesus, men and women of Galilee and beyond, for those Jewish believers who had gathered from around the known world, the world changed. Before that God was known to them in the Temple, that's why they had gathered in Jerusalem, to be in God's house. God was their creator who loved them and was faithful to them. But God kept God's distance, except for special times in their long history of faith. God came to Abraham and told him to go to a new land, God wrestled through the night with Jacob, God rescued Daniel from the lion's den, God gave King David strength, once a year God met the High Priest in the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

And yes, God had talked to their ancestor Moses on Mt. Sinai, but the rest of their ancestors saw God from a distance showing them the way through the desert as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God was great and powerful, and for the most part at a distance.

For the followers of Jesus, they had come to believe he was the Messiah, the Son of God come to earth, who had lived and taught and preached and healed among them for 3 years. He had died on the cross, risen from death and the grave, and they had watched him ascend back to heaven to be with God. He had been with them for three years but now their Messiah was now at a distance too.

But Pentecost changed everything, because Jesus had promised them that when he went back into heaven, God's Holy Spirit would come to them. Jesus told them God would come and make a home in their hearts (John 14:23). We hear Jesus in the 14th chapter of John saying that God's Holy Spirit would come to them and be with them forever (John 14:16)

And in wind, and fire, and change, God's Spirit lit onto each disciple gathered and called them to be followers of God in a new way. God breathed life into that early band of followers and God moved into their hearts through God's Holy Spirit.

Later the Apostle Paul would say in I Corinthians 6 (19-20) "Do you not know that your body is a Temple of the Holy Spirit?"

Pentecost changes everything. God was not a distant deity, dropping in every now and then into human history. God made a home in their hearts, and in our hearts in our baptism.

They no longer had to go the Temple, and we don't have to walk into this sanctuary to be with God, because God's Holy Spirit, God's very self, lives inside our hearts and lives. God is with us moment by moment and breath by breath.

God is not on the outside of our lives, but inside their hearts and lives. At Pentecost, God's Holy Spirit moved inside of humanity, and the world was changed forever by the nearness of God.

And immediately as God made a home in the hearts of those first disciples, they began to tell the saving Good News of Jesus and lives were changed. Because those people gathered in Jerusalem from all over the known world, heard the Good News of Jesus in their own languages, and then they took the good news home with them to Asia, to Africa, to Europe.... And in time the story was told to our ancestors in Togo and in northern Europe and in America... and finally to us...

And why has this truth of God's Holy Spirit been told to us?

Why does it matter that God lives inside each of our hearts?

Because God always needs the next generation to know and tell the Good News of Jesus' healing love.

The gift and the mystery of God's Spirit is that God's Holy Spirit often comes in surprising ways.

The surprise and gift of Pentecost is that God is moving and breathing in the church, by moving and breathing in us.

Yes, us!!! The next disciples in line to be used in God's Kingdom, to show and share the Good news of Jesus' love for all the world. It's us!

So how is the God who lives in our hearts calling you to serve? I think our mistake is to imagine that it is only in huge ways that God's Spirit can use us. Often, it's in the midst of the ups and downs of daily life that God moves and breathes in our lives, so we can move and breath and speak and act in the lives around us.

We may not be asked to speak to hundreds of people gathered in one place, but we may be called to show the love of God in our hearts to the friend from school, the colleague at work, that relatives-- sometimes the one you love, sometime the one who drives you nuts.

It's here in Commission meetings and Sunday mornings and Sunday School that God's Spirit nudges us to act.

It's with the neighbor, or the stranger in the grocery store, the friend we've had forever or our family.

God is moving in breathing in our lives and the life of the church and the gift and surprise of Pentecost is that God needs and uses all of us.

Because God is not far away in heaven,
God is living in our hearts and lives, here and now

Sheila Sheer shared a wonderful story with me this week that shows God's Spirit changing lives. I like this story because it a story of the way God shows up in daily living and uses us.

Some would say this story is filled with coincidences. Which I recently heard called God incidences, not coincidences.

So here is a story of a God moment that changed lives, by an author names Edna Ellison.

I spent the week before my daughter's June wedding running last-minute trips to the caterer, florist, tuxedo shop, and the church about forty miles away. As happy as I was that Patsy was marrying a good Christian young man, I felt laden with responsibilities as I watched my budget dwindle . . . so many details, so many bills, and so little time. My son Jack was away at college, but he said he would be there to walk his younger sister down the aisle, taking the place of his dad who had died a few years before. He teased Patsy, saying he'd wanted to give her away since she was about three years old!

To save money, I gathered blossoms from several friends who had large magnolia trees. Their luscious, creamy-white blooms and slick green leaves would make beautiful arrangements against the rich dark wood inside the church.

After the rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding, we banked the podium area and choir loft with magnolias. As we left just before midnight, I felt tired but satisfied this would be the best wedding any bride had ever had! The music, the ceremony, the reception - and especially the flowers - would be remembered for years.

The big day arrived - the busiest day of my life - and while her bridesmaids helped Patsy to dress, her fiancée, Tim, walked with me to the sanctuary to do a final check. When we opened the door and felt a rush of hot air, I almost fainted; and then I saw them - all the beautiful white flowers were black, funeral black. An electrical storm during the night had knocked out the air conditioning system, and on that hot summer day, the flowers had wilted and died.

I panicked, knowing I didn't have time to drive back to our hometown, gather more flowers, and return in time for the wedding.

Tim turned to me. "Edna, can you get more flowers? I'll throw away these dead ones and put fresh flowers in these arrangements..."

Alone in the large sanctuary, I looked up at the dark wooden beams in the arched ceiling. "Lord," I prayed, "please help me. I don't know anyone in this town. Help me find someone willing to give me flowers in a hurry!" I scurried out praying for four things: the blessing of white magnolias, courage to find them in an unfamiliar yard, safety from any dog that may bite my leg, and a nice person who would not get out a shotgun when I asked to cut his tree to shreds.

As I left the church, I saw magnolia trees in the distance. I approached a house . . . no dog in sight. I knocked on the door and an older man answered. So far so good . . . no shotgun. When I stated my plea the man beamed, "I'd be happy to!"

He climbed a stepladder and cut large boughs and handed them down to me. Minutes later as I lifted the last armload into my car trunk, I said, "Sir, you've made the mother of a bride happy today."

"No, Ma'am," he said. "You don't understand what's happening here."

"What?" I asked.

"You see, my wife of sixty-seven years died on Monday. On Tuesday, I received friends at the funeral home, and on Wednesday... He paused. I saw tears welling up in his eyes. "On Wednesday I buried her." He looked away. "On Thursday most of my out-of-town relatives went back home, and on Friday - yesterday - my children left."

I nodded.

"This morning," he continued, "I was sitting in my den crying out loud. I miss her so much. For the last sixteen years, as her health got worse, she needed me. But now nobody needs me. This morning I cried, 'Who needs an eighty-six-year-old wore-out man? Nobody!' I began to cry louder. 'Nobody needs me!' About that time, you knocked, and said, 'Sir, I need you.'"

I stood with my mouth open.

He asked, "Are you an angel? The way the light shone around your head into my dark living room."

I assured him I was no angel.

He smiled. "Do you know what I was thinking when I handed you those magnolias?"

"No."

"I decided I'm needed. My flowers are needed. Why, I might have a flower ministry! I could give them to everyone! Some caskets at the funeral home have no flowers. People need flowers at times like that and I have lots of them. They're all over the backyard! I can give them to hospitals, churches - all sorts of places. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to serve the Lord until the day He calls me home!"

I drove back to the church, filled with wonder. On Patsy's wedding day, if anyone had asked me to encourage someone who was hurting, would have said, "Forget it! It's my only daughter's wedding, for goodness' sake! There is no way I can minister to anyone today."

But God found a way through dead flowers...

"Edna Ellison is a popular author and speaker. She is a New Hope Author and a native of Clinton, South Carolina. Edna earned her PhD from the University of Alabama.

You can find other articles by her on her website www.ednaellison.com."

<https://pollockrandall.com/healing/coping-with-grief/1000599>

Get ready, God will find a way! The Spirit of God moves and breaths in the church of Jesus Christ, by living and moving and breathing in your hearts and lives, and mine.

This is the gift and the mystery and the plan of Pentecost.

God's Holy Spirit lives in our hearts, and the world will never be the same again.