

GOD'S POWER PLAY

Perhaps you, are wondering if you logged into the wrong church service this morning. You may have come to worship expecting the dignified familiarity of Presbyterian liturgy. Instead, you are welcomed by balloons and color and the rhythmic joy of jazz. And then there are all these noisy stories- bones clacking, winds rushing, a cacophony of languages - even flames bouncing and dancing in the shape of tongues. What is this - a Pentecostal Party? Well, actually it is – but it this a very tame Pentecostal Party. As one famous black preacher has suggested, we white mainline Protestants tend to be Holy Spirit shy!

In years past I always enjoyed meeting with confirmation class students and discussing with them their Statements of Faith. One conversation stands out in my memory. This young woman's statement was wonderful - honest and refreshing and personal - much like we heard last week from our Ladue Chapel seniors. But I noticed one big hole in her statement. She said nothing about the Holy Spirit. When I raised this concern, she looked at me and said - with refreshing candor, "You know, I don't have a clue what the Holy Spirit means!" Which is not unusual for Presbyterians. In all

my years growing up in a preacher's family, I never remember any mention of Pentecost or the Holy Spirit. And as for John Calvin? He does not refer to Pentecost once.

Now, at one level, spirit talk is not all that mysterious. After all we live in an age where "spirituality" has made a comeback - stores are full of instruction manuals about "how to be spiritual." And yet, in the secular world, this warm waterfall of verbiage is about "spirit" with a small s ...what we feel at football games, something generally good, vaguely uplifting... a warm glow...or just a nice experience.

But this is not what "spirituality" means in a Christian sense. In the biblical book of Acts, the word Spirit is mentioned 40 times in the first 13 chapters. And it is about the Holy Spirit - with a capital H and a capital S. It is about God, not us. It is about grace grabbing us - not us grabbing grace. It is about a power beyond our power - a timetable outside our calendar - a purpose beyond our own self-gratification and need. Holy Spirit shatters our illusion of control. Holy Spirit pulverizes our arrogance and pride. Holy Spirit disintegrates whatever rational explanations we might have constructed to contain God. Most of all, Holy Spirit is God's invasion of our privacy - God claiming us body and soul for the ongoing work of creation.

Yes, the Holy Spirit is God's grand power play – inspiring us to become who we are created to be.

The Holy Spirit does not come in proper pious ways. Instead the Holy Spirit rattles like a resurrected valley of dry bones, calling the Hebrew people out of exile into new life. For the first disciples, the Holy Spirit whistles like wind, dances like fire, and chatters in every language we can imagine - speaking and translating every emotional tongue – celebrating our differences of race and gender, of age and wealth, of political persuasion and sexual orientation – yes, the Spirit babbling among us until all the languages of the human heart have been spoken and cherished.

In scripture, all the names for the Holy Spirit are metaphorical. And more often than not, the Spirit comes in secular places and secular people - the places and people where God most needs to be. The Holy Spirit is described as a Comforter - like a Stephens Minister sitting with a couple helping them to navigate the fragility of old age. The Holy Spirit is described as Advocate - like thousands of protesters marching in the streets for an end to gun violence, an end to racism, an end to war. The Holy Spirit is described as Wisdom - like a Bono or a Nelson Mandela pleading for reconciliation in a world filled with revenge. The Holy Spirit is described as Fire - like passionate environmentalists fighting for the

sanctity of a pure mountain stream. The Holy Spirit is described as Breath - like a research physician patiently working in a scientific laboratory, searching for a cure for lung cancer. The Holy Spirit is described as Wind – like a classroom full of three-year olds, tumbling and laughing and rippling through the world of their imaginations. The Holy Spirit is described as Dreams and Visions - like a faithful congregation risking a radical new future in order to honor the riches of their past. Most of all the Holy Spirit is described as God - the power of the Holy in everything that lives and moves and has its being.

We Presbyterians are often described as people of both order and ardor. But sometimes the ardor is hard to see. The moment my ardor was set free was in one of the poor black townships in South Africa, where I travelled when I served as the Moderator of our denomination. There was a small tidy brick church, paid for by your mission dollars, located in the midst of tin shacks and sewage flooded streets. I had been asked to preach on a Sunday morning. And Make Masongo, the amazing pastor of that church, was translating my sermon into Swahili. But at one point, I noticed that folks were laughing at what he was translating – even though what I was preaching was not funny. I quickly realized that my rational North American preaching was simply missing the mark. So, I threw out my notes, and

preached from my heart. And then I moved over and joined the women's choir – as they rocked and rhythmically hit their hymnbooks, singing with utter joy and praise. When the service ended, I was sweating and breathing hard – and full of God's spirit. At which point Make Masongo gave me the best compliment I have ever received. He looked at me and said, "Susan, you must be part Zulu woman!"

Which takes us back to the Pentecost story in scripture, which takes place 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. One hundred and twenty of the closest followers of Jesus are in Jerusalem - along with half the Jewish world. You see, Christian Pentecost first happened on the Jewish Pentecost, a yearly festival in Jerusalem commemorating the time when the law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And so, pilgrims were gathered from all over the world - a cacophony of muddled languages filling the air with confusion.

The 120 believers gathered in the Upper Room are trying to adapt. The tomb is empty, Jesus has appeared in resurrection form, but now, just a few days earlier, he has left them for good – leaving them with a powerful promise but also lots of work to do. They are tired, anxious, confused, curious and a bit overwhelmed. Things are changing. Things have changed. Things will never again be the same. And without a new leader,

to love them, to tell them what to do and how to do it, they are simply stuck. It sort of sounds like us at Ladue Chapel, in the midst of this endless interim period and the burdens of Covid-19.

But then, scripture tells us, as this somber group is praying “the Spirit suddenly comes upon them.” Actually, a better translation might be “...the Spirit surprises them.” And what a Spirit it is! Like a fresh wind, like an invigorating fire, like a symphony of voices blending diverse languages into one stunning harmony, the Spirit comes and a third birth happens. Echoing the creativity of creation, reminiscent of the re-creation of resurrection, in this third movement of God’s continuing composition, the Spirit creates ecclesia – the community of the church. Yes, by the Spirit, God’s power and love are channeled through a diverse people in order to unify the world. And as these transformed disciples erupt out onto the streets of Jerusalem, it is clear that they are changed people – people who are eager to change the world.

What about us? Can we still claim to be Pentecost people – the third birth of God’s creativity in the world? Are we open to be surprised by the Spirit? Are we free enough and courageous enough to confront the evils of the world – hunger and poverty, violent racism and political paralysis? Are we changed enough to greet greed with generosity? Are we brave enough

to dive into an unknown future rather than clinging to the familiarity of the past? Are we faithful enough to spread the Good News of the Gospel, and place the needs of the community above our own personal comfort? Are we Jesus identified enough to make justice and joy the very purpose of our lives?

There is the old story told about the moment Jesus ascended to heaven and was greeted by God and all the angels. In this old story, the angels are filled with great joy, hugging Jesus, and patting him on the back - asking him about how things are on earth. Jesus' answer is clear, "I have entrusted my mission to my followers." The angels gasp: "You mean you are entrusting your entire ministry to mere mortals? What if they fail?" To which Jesus replies, "I have no other plan."

Friends, according to Scripture and the tradition of the Christian church, the Holy Spirit is present among us today. The Holy Spirit is bold and brave - surprising us - shaking us up and pouring us out. Like those disciples gathered in the upper room on that first Pentecost, we have a choice. We can remain the frozen chosen - timid, skeptical, afraid. Or, letting go of our illusion of control, we can tumble out into the world. We can let the Spirit capture us. We can let the Spirit transform us. And we can let the Spirit use us for the common good.

Remember - God has no other plan.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

A sermon preached by
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TEXT: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2: 1-13