“Spiritual Matters”

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Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

I am what you call a cradle Presbyterian. I was baptized by my Presbyterian-minister Grandfather when I was a baby and have attended Presbyterian churches all my life. So when I attended my uncle’s graduation from a Bible college in Cleveland, TN, when I was ten, and saw someone speaking in tongues for the first time, I was, naturally, taken aback. I had never seen anything like that before. People standing up during the middle of a church service and yelling? This is incredible!

I asked my mom what was happening and she explained to me about speaking in tongues. She showed me several passages of Scripture that mentioned it, including today’s Pentecost text, and explained that sometimes this happens in church. You are filled with the Holy Spirit and you are just overcome and a different language pours out of you.

I listened to her explanation and read the Bible passages and watched the people in the church service and just took it all in. Afterward I said to her, “I understand that this happens at this church, but how does the Holy Spirit know *not* to do that at our church?” I could not, for the life of me, imagine someone getting up in my church back home and speak in tongues. It just wasn’t done. I figured that somehow, the Holy Spirit must understand denominational etiquette.

Like the church in Cleveland, Tennessee that day, the story of Pentecost really knows how to grab your attention. With its visuals of a rushing wind and tongues of fire, we know that we’re not dealing with a typical Sunday morning in the Holy Land. No, this day of Pentecost, 50 days after Easter, is something new. Something different. The Spirit is on the loose!

It *is* quite a scene — this first worship service of the new Church. It’s where we hear the first sermon of the Christian church. And as a result, 3000 people were baptized *that day* and became followers of Christ. No pressure for future ministers, huh?

We’ve come a long way since that first Pentecost. The history of the Christian church spans 2000 years now. 2000 years filled with a lot of love, and a lot of fighting, as we tried to figure out the *right* way of doing things. How many Sacraments are there? Should the language of God’s Word be in Latin or in the language of the people? Should our worship space have pictures of Jesus? Or the saints who have gone before us? Or maybe just a cross? Or maybe nothing at all? Is it okay to have tv screens in the sanctuary? Or how about a praise band?

We’ve spent a lot of time trying to “get it right.” And over the years, our worship services have become more stream-lined, more neatly packaged into the standard hour-long format.

In the course of one hour, we sing, pray, confess, and are forgiven. We hear the Word read and proclaimed, receive the Sacraments, praise God for our blessings, and ask for strength and stamina before we are sent out into the world to try again.

Perhaps we have become set in our ways.

Just about every denomination has its trademarks for worship — aspects of worship for which they are known. I’m sure some of you may know what we Presbyterians are known for. We jokingly call ourselves the “frozen chosen” due to our penchant for quiet, reflective worship and our reformed emphasis on predestination. There’s some truth to that name, even if it ruffles our denominational feathers a little bit.

The Babylon Bee is a new “fake news” outlet that has been making its rounds on social media lately. Similar to “The Onion,” it is a satirical website that publishes such stories as, “Church Sees 40% Increase in Giving After Putting Ushers on Commission” and “Longtime Member Self-Identifies as Visitor to Get a Good Parking Spot.”

These stories are all in good fun, and encourage us to have a laugh at ourselves. And so we do.

The Presbyterians have not escaped The Babylon Bee unscathed, either. One of my favorites is an article titled, “Motion-activated Lights Turn Off During Presbyterian Worship Service.” The article tells of a Presbyterian church in Kentucky whose motion-detector lights go off during the minister’s sermon due to inactivity on the part of the congregation.

The article goes on to say that instead of jumping up to turn the lights back on, the congregation simply sat through the end of the sermon and through the final hymn and the lights only turned on when they stood up to leave.

While the article is satirical, I think there is some truth that it points to. Have we become too comfortable in worship? Do we know what to expect each week and therefore put ourselves on autopilot? When this happens, what does it take to bring us out of our daze? And can it last? Are we open to the Spirit’s direction in our worship?

A few years ago, around this time of year, we had a crazy freak storm in Memphis on a Saturday night. Within a very short period of time, over 300 trees were downed as winds over 100 mph rushed through the Bluff City. On Sunday morning, most of Memphis was without power — including the church where I was working.

I got to church that morning and ran into the ministers and in between telling our own war stories related to the storm, we quickly re-worked the worship service for that morning. We had to figure out how to worship in a huge, Gothic cathedral without voice amplification or light or organ.

So, we roped off the back half of the sanctuary, hopefully encouraging people to sit in the front half, so that they’d be able to hear us. We stepped down from the big pulpit and led worship from the floor, behind the Communion table. The choir sang unaccompanied, and instead of a traditional sermon, we read Scripture passages recounting the awesome power of God and of Jesus calming a storm, and we sang, “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me.”

We still had the stubborn few who refused to be moved from their usual pew and so they sat behind the ropes apart from the rest of the congregation. But, for the most part, everyone went along with it, and we had one of the most meaningful worship services I’ve ever been privileged to be a part of.

The Babylon Bee would probably have looked at that service and said, “See?? The Presbyterians are EVEN MORE quiet than normal! Our satirical observations were correct!!”

But really, that worship service, even though it was without amplification systems and organ, the silence of that service woke some of us up. The silence of the service allowed for the members of the congregation to take a collective sigh of relief that we had made it through the storm. It reminded us of God’s promise to protect us and of our call to reach out to our neighbors in the middle of crisis. In the dimness of the sanctuary, it helped us to see the community of faith in a new light. I don’t think I will ever sing “Spirit of the Living God” and not remember that storm or that worship service ever again.

There’s something about deviating from the norm, the day-to-day, that tends to shake us out of our sense of complacency. When we get too caught up in the routine of things, maybe we need a Pentecost-like moment to wake us up — whether it be contemplative worship during a power outage, incorporating music from a different tradition, or allowing the children and youth of the church to lead the entire service. Sometimes we just need that little nudge for change.

The apostles on the day of Pentecost were no exception to this need for a jolt of energy and revitalization.

It had been fifty long days since Christ’s resurrection. The apostles have spent the past month or so reliving the precious time they’d had with Christ — the teachings they heard, the miracles they witnessed. There had been so much momentum leading up to Christ’s death. They’d seen the numbers of people following Jesus grow and grow. And then…everything changed.

Their Lord was taken from them.

After his resurrection, he returned to walk with them for a bit before leaving them *again*. In the first chapter of Acts, Christ tells them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for a baptism from the Holy Spirit before they continue His work. They’re in a holding pattern, with no end in sight. And so we find them, sitting in a house in Jerusalem, waiting for their next instructions.

If we close our eyes and try to picture it, we can see the apostles sitting in the house, maybe a little down and despondent over their missing Christ. Maybe every few minutes, Matthias, the newest apostle, eager to prove himself suggests a way they might still minister to the people. The other apostles gently admonish him, saying, “No, we have to wait! The Lord will send us the Holy Spirit and *then* we will know what to do!”

Then the sound of a rushing, violent wind comes blowing through, disrupting bits of paper and debris on the floor, along with their melancholy. There is the awesome sight of flaming tongues of fire above their heads and the heat that accompanies them. And then we hear the cacophony of the Holy Spirit filling them and the different languages that pour forth from them. They look at one another, their eyes widened in equal parts fear and amazement as they speak about God’s deeds of power in various languages, previously unknown to them.

This is truly a jarring event.

It’s no surprise that when the apostles spill out of the house, speaking the languages of 15 other regions, that some members of the crowd chalk their newfound language skills up to being drunk on new wine. This can be the only explanation.

And then Peter steps forward to address the crowd, to interpret the events.

I love that it is Peter who does this. Because, even though today we may remember Peter as the cornerstone of the Church, at this point in the story, he still has a somewhat dubious reputation as a follower of Christ. We remember that during the night of Jesus’s arrest and trial, Peter denies that he is a follower of Christ three times. In Will Willimon’s commentary on Acts, he points out the almost-absurdity of Peter being the person to preach the first sermon of the newly formed Church.

He writes, “…Here, before the half inquiring, half-mocking crowd, Peter is the first, the very first to lift up his voice and proclaim openly the word that only a few weeks before he could not speak, even to a serving woman at midnight.”

Willimon continues to say, “In Genesis 2:7, the Spirit of God breathed life into dust and created a human being. In Acts 2:1-4, the Spirit has breathed life into a once cowardly disciple and created a new man who now has the gift of bold speech.”

The Holy Spirit, in this holy moment, breathes new life into Peter and new life into the Church. And after this moment, nothing is ever the same. In this moment of extreme disorientation, the Christ movement finds its orientation. It is as Scripture says,

“I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

and your young men shall see visions,

and your old men shall dream dreams.”

In this new vision of the Kingdom, the Holy Spirit affects all, both women and men, young and old. There is no turning back, and no escaping its influence.

The day of Pentecost is life-altering for the apostles. The excitement of the day will not be one they will quickly forget. What began as a typical day for the gathered 12, will end with the baptisms of 3000. 3000 people begin their faith journeys that day as a result of the Spirit’s radical movement.

But, it doesn’t always take a typical pentecostal moment to stir up a person’s faith. Sometimes it *is* wild like the rush of a violent wind. Sometimes it *is* a worship service like the one I saw in Cleveland, Tennessee in which people stand up and speak in tongues while another person, equally filled with the Spirit, interprets. Sometimes it *is* these wild and wonderful things. And those moments are beautiful and radical.

But sometimes it’s smaller, like the change that comes from worshiping without power. Or, the beauty of working together with people different from you to serve a hot meal on a cold day or to build a Habitat House. Or, sometimes it’s as simple as lying in bed at night, reflecting over the moments of your day, searching for the challenges and the joys that day brought. Those moments can be just as beautiful, just as radical, and just as eye-opening.

When those moments happen, we must ask ourselves, What has been revealed to me about myself or *about God* in that disorienting moment? Where is the Spirit prompting me to re-orient my life?

While our worship services may not always be as chaotic as that first worship service on Pentecost, it doesn’t mean that the Spirit is not at work already in this space, moving around waking us up to new life and the continually renewing love of God. The trick is, learning to be open and receptive to it. If we learn to be receptive to the Spirit’s movement, we might just become aware of it already happening.

May the Spirit open our eyes to the wild, new things that it is doing among us here at Covenant, and may we allow the Spirit in, to push us, to compel us, to inspire us.

All praise be to God.

Amen.