***WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?***

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Text: Acts 2:1-21

Ten days ago the CDC issued revised guidelines on the wearing of masks and other face coverings indoors and outdoors. The guidelines suggest that fully vaccinated people can safely remove masks and need not socially distance in settings where all others are fully vaccinated and in some congregate settings among others who are not fully vaccinated. Exceptions are provided for hospitals, public transportation, nursing homes, and some other settings where masks are still recommended, and for those who may be immuno-compromised or have other underlying health concerns; for those who are not yet fully vaccinated the recommendations for face coverings and social distancing remain unchanged. Since the CDC issued those guidelines, states, localities, businesses, churches, and individuals have been wrestling with the same question: *What does this mean?*

For some folks, it seems to mean: *the pandemic is over*, and the CDC announcement is the green light for a return to a pre-pandemic normal, though that is NOT what the guidelines say! For others it means we are one step closer to the end of the pandemic tunnel while still navigating the tunnel! For others it means great uncertainty as to what and where masks must be or should be worn and among whom we need to socially distance. Unresolved are questions about how this impacts children and what guidelines apply to them. What guidelines apply to children who are too young to be vaccinated, or adults working with children, or adults spending time with children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren? The announced guidelines are for individuals, so how are grocery stores, businesses, churches, and other groups to change? This week automakers announced they will continue to fully mask on assembly lines but will review that policy in two weeks. And for all those distinguishing between vaccinated and unvaccinated, how, if it all, is the vaccination status of individuals to be confirmed? Is it an honor system or is some evidence of vaccination required, as it was for crowds at the NFL draft? It is new fast-changing territory for all of us.

In our particular context we are wrestling with what this means for worship and our preschool program, for Sunday School classes and fellowship activities, for Outreach projects and team meetings. How best do we get back to in-person activities together safely in order to live into our call to glorify God and love one another and be welcoming to all? We may wish the answer was crystal clear, but sometimes it requires a little time for reflection or further clarification before a proper path emerges.

In that respect, our current state is not unlike that of people in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost – a little confused, cautiously hopeful, searching for answers. Disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus had been largely unseen, locked behind closed doors while awaiting holy guidance on what they should do next. Outside those doors the city was astir as folks from around the world came to Jerusalem, not to see what God might do next with Jesus’ disciples, but to celebrate the Festival of Weeks, a Jewish festival with roots in the Levitical law. They had come from a host of countries near and far, some of which might be familiar to us today and some of which we would be clueless about. Yet when the disciples burst out into the streets speaking of God’s great deeds of power, all the people were able to understand what they were saying; it didn’t matter that they spoke different languages and came from different places. All of them heard and understood the word from the Lord that the disciples proclaimed. The people in the streets did not understand how that was possible. How could everyone understand what was being said? What empowered them to speak as they did? In their various languages they asked one another: *What does this mean?*

Some said they thought that it meant the disciples were drunk, though one wonders how speaking in languages they never spoke before would lead anyone to conclude they had been drinking. If drinking enabled you to speak new languages, there might be a whole new curriculum for language studies in high schools and colleges! But Peter soundly rejected that explanation and explained that what was happening was what Joel had prophesied: the coming of God’s Spirit, whatever that might mean.

Luke goes to great lengths to emphasize that whatever this means, it means something for all people. Again and again he uses broadly inclusive words to describe this event. In the opening sentences of this passage, he writes that the disciples “were ALL together in one place”, a sound like the rush of a violent wind “filled the ENTIRE house”, and a tongue as of fire “rested on EACH of them” so that “ALL of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. He represents those gathered in Jerusalem as being “from EVERY nation under heaven”, and says they “ALL were amazed and perplexed.” When Peter quotes the passage from Joel, he describes the coming of the Spirit upon ALL flesh, upon sons and daughters, young and old, slave and free, male and female. The Pentecost event is not an event for some small segment of the followers of Jesus. The coming of the Spirit is an all-inclusive event that impacts ALL – EACH and EVERY one, for the good news of Jesus Christ is for all people in all places in all times! And by ALL, I think he means ALL!

That is not to say that the Spirit came upon all those people in Jerusalem at once that day. The church was birthed when the Spirit came upon those disciples gathered behind closed doors, but as they burst out to spread the good news, the Spirit continued to work through them – inspiring speech, moving hearts, changing lives, and sparking new life in new generations of baptized believers. The Spirit inspired Peter to speak to the crowds, and about 3,000 people were baptized that day! From there the good news was carried to those countries from which those pilgrims had traveled and beyond! For two thousand years that work has continued as the Spirit has pushed disciples from all walks of life to all corners of the earth to share the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Wherever God’s Spirit is at work, that question raised in the streets of Jerusalem has echoed in cities and towns, in country roads and barren deserts, in Louisiana bayous and the slums of Calcutta, for it is a fundamental question of faith: *What does this mean?* And more specifically: *What does this mean for us?*

How would you answer that question on this Pentecost Sunday? What does this mean – this Christian faith, this coming of the Spirit, this life and death and resurrection of Jesus? What does it mean to the world, but more importantly: what does it mean to you? C. S. Lewis once answered that question this way: “*I believe in Christianity as I believe in the sun; not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.*” Is that what your Christian faith means to you? Is it the lens through which you see all of life, a perspective that helps you to see hope where there is despair, life in the face of death, vocation in your job, God’s hand at work in and around you – even in God-forsaken places? Or is it something else?

Does it mean for you a set of beliefs – things you think are true, say are true, believe are true? Every week we affirm our faith together in the words of some creed – today in the words of *A Brief Statement of Faith* – repeating what past generations have said it all means. Do those creeds express what it all means to you? Or is it something more, as Brian McLaren suggests when he asks:

*What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life?*[[1]](#endnote-1)

Is that way of life what your Christian faith means to you – the Spirit-motivating force that shapes what you do and who you are, and guides your life in a particular direction day to day? That way of life is described by N.T. Wright who writes:

*A Jewish friend of mine reports that when her children babysit for Christian couples who are out volunteering in the youth club or the prison or the hospice, the children simply say that the couple are out ‘being Christian*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Is that what it means to you to *be Christian*, to live day to day in a way that reflects Christ’s call to love God and to love all your neighbors as yourself? Is that what it means to be “filled with the Spirit”? Or after a year of fighting this pandemic, does it mean anything different or anything at all to you anymore?

In some ways this pandemic has forced us to rethink what being church and being faithful Christians mean. It has forced us to adapt and adopt new technologies to continue being the church when we could not safely gather together face-to-face. It has forced us to reconsider what it means to be community, to care for one another, and to serve our neighbors. In some ways it has brought us closer together as we have reached folks who we were not reaching before this pandemic, and in some ways it has driven us further apart in order to keep each other safe. In some ways the virus has chased us back behind closed doors to wait for the Spirit to inspire us once again. And now as vaccines become more widely available and we emerge from behind the closed doors of this pandemic, we trust the Spirit will guide us, perhaps prod us, in some new directions. Life post-pandemic will not be the same as life pre-pandemic.

I doubt the disciples had any idea what God had in mind as they waited behind those closed doors or knew what was happening when the Spirit came rushing in among them, but I am sure that going out and proclaiming the Gospel in the streets in a multitude of languages was not on their list of possibilities! Who knows what God will do with us! Who knows where the Spirit will lead us next! But we do know this: God will do in us and through us what we cannot, could not do alone, and whatever God has in mind will exceed what we think is likely or probable or even possible. For that is how the Spirit works – at Pentecost and today – in wild and wonderful ways. John McIntyre describes the Holy Spirit as “*the imagination of God let loose in the world”*.[[3]](#endnote-3) Brothers and sisters, that is what is coming – the imagination of God let loose among us. Imagine the possibilities! Amen

1. Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Convergent: New York, 2016, p.2 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Scripture*, HarperOne:2014, p.190 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John McIntyre quoted by J. Barrie Shepherd, *Whatever Happened to Delight?* Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2006, p.55 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)