Roanoke, Virginia

Pentecost, May 19, 2022

"Seeing What Cannot Be Seen"

Acts 2:1-13, Romans 8:22-27

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Today is Pentecost Sunday. The passage so often read on this day is the story that tells of a Jewish festival giving birth to the Christian church. I've preached on this passage from Acts 2 so many times before. It tells of tongues of fire and people from other places hearing the Gospel in their own language—this mass revival where thousands come to the cause of the one who just days before had been crucified as a criminal. I've preached on it so many times. I was going to change it up and avoid that passage this year and focus on Paul's reflections on the Holy Spirit out of Romans 8. My effort was in vain. I kept being pulled back to what happened that day in Jerusalem. So, I gave up. Before hearing the invited keynote speaker out of Romans 8, listen as the uninvited protester has its say.

Acts 2:1-13

> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** 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. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.
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> **5** Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and

Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, [11] Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." [12] All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" [13] But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

Acts 2 goes on to describe how Peter then preaches a sermon to this diverse, international, audience. Somehow, his sermon cuts through language and cultural barriers and people of many lands hear and believe that the one who was crucified was raised to lead a movement—this is going to sound crazy— and not of revenge and takeover but of forgiveness and reconciliation. That so many diverse people hear this and believe it—that's the miracle.

Not all hear and believe. There are those who are too committed to believe this could ever happen. They stand off to the side, and give their spin: "What a bunch of drunks."

For now, though, let's stand off from the stand-off cynics. Let's celebrate what is described in Acts 2. That passage honors events like the dedication day of *Alexa House* when a diverse community became one because a message of grace spoke to all. Responding to three unrelated tragedies and responding to a common cause, people of different churches, different faiths, different races, believers, and unbelievers met at a graceful point. Fundraising, renovation, design work, and celebration planning came to a single Mother's Day point and religious and cultural differences disappeared. It was as if a new language was spoken and we all heard the same message at the same time, the message of grace. It honors the day of Pentecost.

Our passage from Romans is about the Holy Spirit as well, but the Romans passage is about waiting—even about the Spirit waiting with us. Paul speaks more to the prayers of those who are asking for the Spirit to come, especially those who mourn. It is

- the waiting for answers when life seems senseless.
- waiting for healing when the heart is wounded,
- waiting to understand when the path forward is not clear,
- and, in the case of Alexa House, waiting for different lines to come to a point-
    - the need for Family Promise for a facility,
    - the demand of the Fire Marshall for safety,
    - the lines of responding to three different tragedies…

waiting for all these lines to converge on the day when the house can be dedicated, and a ribbon cut at the site of a future playground.

It is the kind of waiting that happens in Jerusalem with the followers of Jesus before Pentecost. It is necessary to wait because the Spirit won't come on demand. It is the waiting

that happens in the world where the things that divide us define us,
and we wait,
wait,
wait

for the day to come when the Spirit can puncture holes in the walls that divide us so

- our shared humanity will be revealed,
- our shared responsibility in the sin that divides us be confessed,
- our shared need for grace exposed,
- and our shared need to love strangers,
    - even enemies
        - because love is what heals us.

Here is what Paul says:

> 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains
> of labor, 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit,
> groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we
> were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already
> sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.
>
> 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
> but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches
> hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints
> according to the will of God.

Two passages about the Holy Spirit, but not saying the same thing—almost in tension with each other. Let's go back to the Day of Pentecost passage in Acts 2.

Many describe the Day of Pentecost as being the church's special day—its Happy Birthday. That's a good way to think of Pentecost. But for what I want to say this morning, I want you to think of the day differently. I want you to consider that the church already existed. After all, on the days prior to this one, followers of Jesus were doing those things that churches do: meeting for worship, fellowship, education, and mutual care. But they were done in hiding. In private. So, maybe it would be better to say that this was the church's bar mitzvah day, a coming-of-age day when a young church hiding in private suddenly goes public.

That is what I hear described in Acts. Followers of Jesus are confused and frightened and stay in. "We are hiding from them, and they might be out to get us." Their fear seems justified, doesn't it, because what happened to Jesus could happen to them. Also, their saying that Jesus who died—*was raised*, that he appeared to them, that he is now at loose in the world—well that sounds like something people who are drunk would say.

But on this day, after waiting and praying, something is ignited. Something private becomes public. Fear turns to fervor, and now Jews from around the world—many of whom may have heard about Jesus but few of whom knew Jesus personally—get as excited about Jesus as those who emerged into views speaking of him in a way that they can understand… speaking in a way that they feel their individual lives are being addressed. Cultural differences and divides that had built over centuries were for a shining moment blown away and each heard of the reconciling love and grace of God as if it was spoken uniquely to them.

So, while the church may have been growing up before this day, on Pentecost it emerged with adult responsibilities in the world. Yes, a bar mitzvah day for the church, or an ordination and commissioning day. A childlike community moves from self-protection to being an adult community living its life in the world.

Notice that it is the Church that emerges that day. You can point to it. What does not appear—what you cannot point to—is the Holy Spirit that ignites the church. The Spirit is unseen and unscheduled, but the Holy Spirit remains unseen and keeps its own calendar. Notice that in describing the Spirit, words like fire and wind are used because both are about effects.

I remember having a conversation with Heather Teems, a visual artist who is Cathy Cannon's sister. Heather was working on four pieces that would represent the four essential elements of life: earth, water, air, and fire. She was having a difficult time thinking of a way to portray "air." How do you portray something you cannot see. Her solution was not to depict air but rather to depict what happens when air moves as wind. She painted a dandelion. The pappus, or fluff, tugging against and breaking free from their stem.[1]

That painting could well be cover-art for a sermon based on John 3:8 which says this about the Spirit in talking about the wind, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going." The Spirit keeps its own schedule and doesn't arrive on demand. I don't know what to say to you about speaking in tongues which many Pentecostalists and other charismatic Christians seem to be able to do on demand. I'm not judging the authenticity of their worship. I'm just sticking to the biblical narratives where the Spirit is not at our beck and call. It is

- something to be prayed for, but not demanded,
- something to be anticipated, but not scheduled,
- something that is not called upon but does the calling.

As Paul describes it, the Spirit is present even in its absence—praying with us, groaning with us, waiting with us as we are waiting for the day when the Spirit will rush in like a mighty wind.

That's the Spirit I see in the biblical narrative, acting of its own accord as the unexpected guest—sometimes the intruder. Some examples:

- In the creation stories, the face of the deep was void and lifeless. It was the Spirit of God that separates water from land and brings teeming life to the sea and to the land.
- When the Spirit calls to Samuel, he assumes it is someone else in the house who is calling him. He did not expect to be called to the life of a prophet.
- When Isaiah enters the Temple that day to worship, he did not expect to suddenly sense God's whole presence the place calling him to leave his comfortable life to be a prophet who says the hard truth when no one wants to hear and then the glad truth when most everyone believes it is too good to be true.

[1] https://www.facebook.com/reel/371583322361692

- In Mark's Gospel, the Spirit isn't called upon, but shows up as a surprise guest at his baptism. And then it is the Spirit that drives Jesus out in the wilderness for 40 days of testing in preparation of his ministry.
- And on Pentecost, the followers of Jesus have no idea that the Spirit is going to pay them a visit that day and make them loud and vocal about Jesus being raised. Nor did the pilgrims in Jerusalem from around the world except their Pentecost celebration to call them into a movement that gathers around a crucified but risen Lord. They just came for the festival.

Those visits of the Spirit are unscheduled and unexpected moments. That is what Paul is telling us in chapter 8 of Romans. We wait, and the whole creation waits with us. We groan because there is so much that divides us. We want something to break through to expose our common humanity and bring the peace and reconciliation we have been praying for. But let's remember what we are praying for, so when it is happening, we don't just write it off as the behavior of drunks.

Let's remember what happened with Isaiah, with Jesus, with the disciples at Pentecost, with Saul when he became Paul, with Peter when he had his dream about eating food that is not kosher. Before the Spirit could become a mighty rush of wind, lines had to converge. There had to be the long, slow, gentle breezes of the spirit that work within relationships and within circumstances of life to bring about what is so hard to bring about.

And this is what is so hard to bring about in so many of these instances and certainly at Pentecost—to bring about people who are so different from each other, and define themselves because of their differences, suddenly to have those differences stripped away and to see that we all commonly need the grace that Peter preaches about.

That's what the great movements of the Spirit in the Bible are about. It is what Pentecost is about.

And, it is what so many personal experiences of the Holy Spirit are about. There is this vision people have when the Spirit rushes like a mighty wind into their hearts. They are personal experiences that are like what happened at Pentecost where eyes are open to others in front of us and see shared humanity.

When Peter Enns was here, he talked about one of those kinds of experiences. He told of being in a taxi in San Francisco on his way to give a lecture. It was midday and the streets were crowded with people, people everywhere, an array of nationalities, income, sexual orientation—Most were dressed for work or daily life, though some wore religious garb of their faiths. Dodging each other, waiting for each other, walking past each other without speaking. In a moment, though, In his view, all looked different. All these isolated strangers to him were connected to him. He did not know a single one of them, but they were clearly his brothers and sisters. It was not that he had some intellectual realization, but his shared humanity with others was something he knew all along. But this was a different kind of knowing. There was nothing that separated him from any of them. Differences didn't matter. All children of God. All equally loved. All of

creation was in God's "relentless, loving embrace."[2] It was a new beginning for him. He was a Bible scholar whose theology focused so much on the differences that set true Christians apart. On that day, he realized that the real project of his life was to focus on God's grace for all.

I won't call them out, but there are members of this church who have told me of similar visions. I will tell you about an experience I had. It was at St. Andrews Presbyterian College. I majored in philosophy and drama. I was a philosophy major because I was trying to understand—I was trying to figure things out—get answers. On one hard day of studying, I had to take a break and I went for a walk around the lake in the middle of the campus. And then in a moment, looking out over the lake and the trees beyond, it all looked different to me. And this is the single important revelation I had that day. This was not a world I was called to understand. This was a world I was called to love. And I began thinking about ways I could serve the world by loving more than understanding.

Y'all, I'm a mainline Christian. I'm a Presbyterian. I am normally not comfortable talking about visions like this. I am very aware that when people like me talk about visions like that there are people standing on the edge as they did in Jerusalem on Pentecost who might have the logical reaction and say, "That's crazy." Or, "They must be drunk."

But here is the point I need to make. I am not talking about anyone seeing anything unusual. Nothing looks different. Nothing visible changes. The only thing that changes remains unseen.

- I don't think that anyone else on the streets of San Francisco that day saw anything different than Peter. They would not have seen anything to explain why Peter needed to take some time for himself, and somehow give that lecture he no longer had the heart to give.
- I don't think anyone else walking around the lake at St. Andrews that day would understand why I needed to take a moment, sit by the lake, and think about what I just experienced.
- I don't think that those in Jerusalem that day who thought the new converts were drunk in Jerusalem saw anything different than what is sometimes seen in big cities—a gathering, a rally, the enthusiasm of a crowd about something or other.

Nothing changes that is seen. You can only see the effects of the Holy Spirit in what it ignites. Here we don't have to get lost in God told me this or God showed me that. We can focus on this inner realization that the person sitting beside you in the pew right now, and the people you least understand out there, and the people who are constantly being defined to you as different, and maybe even people to demonize—every single one of them is connected to you. They are no different from you. We are all children of God. We all need the same grace, and the same hope.

I want to tell a final story. It is fictional, though I heard that the author, Abraham Verghese, really describes through a character's experience something that he experienced. In *The Covenant of*

[2] The story Enns told during the Edmunds Lectures is told in his book *Curveball.* This quote is on p. 38. (HarperOne, 2023).

Water, he writes of an experience of Dr. Rune Orqvist, a Swedish doctor. He is living a happy, though not-quite-fulfilling, life serving people in India. Nothing needs to change. He has good friends and many interests outside of his work as a doctor. He lacks nothing.

So, he is not prepared at all for what happens one night. He is sitting on a bench looking out over the sea, smoking one last pipe to wind down before heading to bed. He hears the shuffling sound of a beggar approaching him. Even in moonlight, he recognizes that it is a leper. This is the 1920s, so Dr. Rune would be comfortable using that term and not calling it Hansen's disease. The leper stubbles along on his stump, a cup tied around his neck where those so moved can place a coin.

Then Dr. Rune has his moment. He has always been a man to have empathy for someone like this man, someone afflicted with a disease. But this moment is different. The epiphany has nothing to do with seeing a person despite the disease. It is something beyond that.

> "In a dizzying shift of perspective, Rune suddenly feels he has become the leper; it is Rune who sees cloudy, smeared images with no edges, Rune who discerns light and shadow but remember what it was like to have moonlight fall on his face; those are Rune's misshapen, ulcerated feet wrapped with bloodied gunnysack that is secured with coir rope…."
> Remarkably, "The difference between him and the leper is no difference at all."[3]

Rune's life changes. He closes his successful practice to go live in a colony of lepers. Of course, he serves them as their doctor. That's his profession. But he goes there because he wants to live with *his people*.

That is the epiphany of Pentecost. All these differences that are supposed to mean so much, erased. Everyone exposed in naked need of God's grace. We have only one option, and that is to love.

[3] Abraham Verghese, *The Covenant of Water*, Grove Press, New York, 2023, pp. 196. (story begins on p. 195).s