

Sometimes I find myself surrounded by people who feel like or I myself feel like Chicken Little- "The sky is falling! The sky is falling! Day after day more and more injustices occur, and it can feel overwhelming, helpless, scary, and even hopeless for some among us. All you have to do is read or listen to the news- just this morning I read that Unicef has recorded that over 17,000 children in Gaza and the surrounding areas have suffered and died since October 2023 due to being caught in the crossfire of the war between Israel and Gaza. Then there's the war between Ukraine and Russia. Then in the US due to the uptick in immigration enforcement- more than 1500 alone just this past week. People being removed from their homes and job sites and many of those are legal and not criminals but just because they "look" a certain way or "speak" differently. And some people are beyond tired of it and what started out as anti-ICE protests have begun to turn into riots in the streets of LA. The President has called in the National Guard- 2000 of them to "handle" those who are angry at the injustices. Yes, we can be angry, and yes, we can protest non-violently. And then you have locally where there will be the first reading tomorrow night at the City Council meeting on an anti-camping ordinance in the city of Greenville. Some of us are greatly disturbed at any one of these, while others of us may not be. Some may be relieved. We are definitely a diverse group of Christ's disciples living in the already but not yet. I am absolutely thrilled that you came to worship God on this rainy Sunday in June because we all need to be reminded of God's promises and provision through the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is on the move among us. Today we celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit by fire, wind and word. The word Pentecost means "fiftieth," and it coincides with a Jewish festival that took place 50 days after Passover which was a celebration of the spring harvest but later also

became a way to remember the giving of the Ten Commandments. Luke tells us that 120 believers were gathered together in Jerusalem on the 50th day after Jesus' resurrection when they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. This morning, as always, I invite us be attentive and open to God's Spirit in this place as we listen for what God is saying to the church today. But first, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

During the discussion of a book on the Holy Spirit written by a ninety-four-year-old German theologian named Jürgen Moltmann, an interviewer asked him: "How do you activate the Holy Spirit? Can you take a pill? Do the pharmaceutical companies [deliver the Spirit]?" Moltmann's bushy eyebrows shot up. Shaking his head, he grinned, answering in accented English. "What can I do? Don't do anything. Wait on the Spirit, and the Spirit will come." Some of us may want to take full credit and to not believe that the Holy Spirit is among us. Moltmann highlighted our mistaken belief that our energy and expertise make things happen (Winn Collier, [link](#)). The Book of Acts reveals that God makes things happen. Jesus told us that he was sending God's Spirit as his advocate and boy did he! Some like to focus on Pentecost as the birth of the church, while others don't think it really is. I believe it's a whole lot more. Author Peter Ludwig in his book, *The End of Procrastination: How to Stop Postponing and Live A Fulfilled Life*, writes about the power of personal and group vision to motivate action and foster change. He writes, "This kind of motivation has been one of the most important driving forces in human history- it has topped dictators, launched revolutions, and initiated other changes that have transformed the world." Luke, the author of Acts, offers followers of Christ- similar to the Book of Revelation- a vision to motivate action and foster change. Pentecost is a prophecy fulfilled and God's people are given a

vision to guide and to save. “The miracle of Pentecost reveals a community that is both inclusive- ‘all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit’ (v. 4)- and wildly diverse- ‘devout Jews from every nation under heaven’ (v. 5). The text speaks of a people gifted with the ability to speak in new languages; hearing, understanding, and communicating in ways that promoted a sense of belonging” (Teri McDowell Ott, *The Presbyterian Outlook*). Scholars differ as to comparing Pentecost to Genesis’ story of Babel (11:1-9). I tend to fall into the camp that views Pentecost, as we also talked last week about comparing the garden in Genesis with the city in Revelation- the bookends, as reshaping and improving upon the arrogance and divisiveness of Babel- a new creation, thus revealing “God’s true hope for humanity: a diverse community peacefully coexisting through mutual understanding and shared purpose” (Ott). Some of you may say, “Preacher, you’re talking about a world that we don’t currently live in. That would sure be ideal though, wouldn’t it?” And I would say, “You are absolutely correct!” That’s because the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven is not of this world. The story of Pentecost tells the story of the upside down kingdom of God in which God reigns, and of which we’re invited to be citizens.

One of my most challenging and profound seminary professors died this week at the age of 92. Rev. Dr. Walter Bruggemann, who I have mentioned more times than I can count in sermons, was an amazing OT scholar who wrote over 100 books and influenced many disciples of Christ in his lifetime. Dr. Brueggemann knew about to step on everyone’s toes and make you squirm as he taught from Scripture. Just as you were feeling righteous, he would come and stand at your desk and call you- or people like you- out. He ruffled feathers a lot because he always recognized God’s sovereignty. He opened my eyes in the Old Testament,

which completely informed the NT, and helped me to grow in my faith for which I am most grateful. He always pushed his students to teach and preach with prophetic imagination- helping us to envision an alternative world, counter to the dominant reality. “This holy imagination gives us a blueprint for building, which interfaith leader, Eboo Patel, says is what religion does best. Patel says, “What religion does is articulate an ideal- the kingdom of God. And it builds communities that seek to approximate the ideal. Every community of faith is an attempt to approximate the kingdom of God and to move the world closer to it” (Ott). It’s just that we don’t do all the moving. God does. In his book entitled *Prophetic Imagination*, Dr. Brueggemann states that the task of prophetic imagination is to “disrupt complacency and self-deception, allowing the recognition of God as the ultimate authority, even in times of endings or loss.” One of my favorite Brueggemann quotes, of which there are many, is this: “The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.” It is not easy to have hope and to live counter to the culture when all seems lost but that is exactly what Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit calls us to be and to do. “Given the blueprint of Pentecost, we are to build communities that welcome and include in a world that excludes. We are to build communities that prioritize and value diversity in a world that separates and segregates. We are to build relationships of mutual respect and understanding in a world full of people who talk over others, fail to listen, and dominate (and that can sometimes look like holding our elected officials accountable). We are called to build a Pentecost alternative” (Ott). Let’s be real honest here- as the church- we don’t always live into this Pentecost blueprint and yet, the vision is still given to us,- here in

Scripture- and it is a powerful, motivating force. As Peter proves, it'll preach, setting hearts aflame with a desire for more of what God promises and provides" (Ott). "To speak across barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, denomination or politics is to challenge stereotype and to risk ridicule. It is a brave and disorienting act. How often do we engage in it in our churches" (Thomas)?

Like it or not, this is what the Holy Spirit required of Christ's frightened disciples- "to stop huddling in their version of sameness and safety. To throw open their windows and doors. To feel the pressure of God's hand against their backs, pour themselves into the streets, and speak. When the Holy Spirit came, silence was no longer possible; they were on fire. In the end, the Pentecost story required surrender on both sides. Those who spoke had to brave languages outside of their comfort zones. They had to risk vulnerability in the face of difference, and do so with no guarantee of welcome. They had to trust that no matter how awkward, inadequate, or silly they felt, the words bubbling up inside of them- new words, strange words, scary words- were nevertheless essential words. Meanwhile, the crowds who listened had to take risks as well. They had to suspend disbelief, drop their cherished defenses, and opt for wonder instead of contempt. They had to widen their circles, and welcome strangers with odd accents into their midst. Not all of them managed it- there were those who doubted- those witnesses "who couldn't bear to be bewildered, to have their neat categories of belonging and exclusion explode in their faces rationalizing the miracle away. Like their ancestors at Babel, who scattered at the first sign of difference, they retreated into the well-worn narrative of denial" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). Nothing to see here, folks. This isn't of God. These are blubbering idiots who've

hit the bottle a little too hard, if you know what we mean. They're obviously drunk. "But Peter wouldn't let these accusations stand" (Ott). **But Peter, with the help of the Holy Spirit, wouldn't let these accusations stand.** It sounds as if Peter waited until the Holy Spirit moved him into action and speech. Because "the start of the church had nothing to do with human strategy or impressive leadership. Rather, the Spirit arrived 'like the blowing of a violent wind' into a room of frightened, helpless, and bewildered disciples (2:2). Next, the Spirit shattered all ethnic superiorities by gathering people who were at odds into one new community. The disciples were as shocked as anyone to see what God was doing within them. They didn't make anything happen; 'the Spirit enabled them' (v. 4)" (Winn Collier, [link](#)). Because "even in that atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism, some people spoke, and some people listened, and into those astonishing exchanges, God breathed fresh, new life" (Thomas).

What is the Spirit saying to us- God's people- today? "It feels very much to me like we live in a world where words have become toxic because they're easy to type or say behind someone's back- where the languages of our cherished "isms" threatened to further polarize and destroy us- "where the troubles of our day- global, civilizational, catastrophic, local- cry out for the balm of a bold and creative Body of Christ willing to engage across barriers. "In the face of difference, God compelled God's people to engage. From Day One, the call was to press in, linger, listen and speak. Because here's the thing: no matter how passionately I disagree with your opinions and beliefs, I cannot disagree with your experience. Once I have learned to hear your story, then I can no longer flourish at your expense" (Thomas). This is God at work in us. Thanks be to God!

On this Pentecost Sunday, when it may feel to some like we are losing this battle against forces of greed and evil, let's not underestimate the power of the Spirit's gift of holy imagination" (Ott). Like Peter, we too can stand up and speak out. Yet, we must also hold this in tension with the fact that "the church—and our shared work in the world—isn't defined by what we can do. We're entirely dependent on what only the Spirit can do. This allows us to be both bold and restful" (Collier). This is a hard word for some of us doers out there, but we must wait on God's Spirit. This doesn't mean that some aren't called to stand up and speak out while others are called to listen and be transformed- regardless all of it requires courage and an attune ear and heart to God's Spirit. We need to trust and be attentive to the Spirit, who is always at work among us, to empower us and to give us courage to navigate falsehoods and to be transformed. Come, Holy Spirit, come! Amen.