

What Comes Next?

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares,

that 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.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,

in those days I will pour out my Spirit;

and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above

and signs on the earth below,

blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness

and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

So can I be honest? I was excited all week about preaching this Sunday, because today is Pentecost!

What some of you may not know about me is that while I am a cradle Christian, I am not a cradle Presbyterian. I did not start my faith journey, as a member of a Presbyterian Church, in the tradition that I was born into, Pentecost is the whole shebang, I mean Easter just barely inches out first place and that's only because Jesus got up. I am not a cradle Presbyterian, I was born into a Pentecostal tradition, a tradition some would say is the furthest thing from Presbyterianism.

But honestly, the two aren't all that different. In fact, the church where I grew up, and this congregation where I have had the pleasure of serving aren't that different at all. Both congregations sing with gusto, and it's normal to hear someone crack a joke or two during worship. There are smiles shared and stories exchanged in the four walls of the sanctuary and the Word; the proclamation of the Word is taken seriously. In fact, even now I like to joke that I am a Pentecostal masquerading as a Presbyterian.

I'm a Presby-costal. There are many similarities between the church where I grew up, and this congregation here, however, there is one major difference, and that is, the Spirit.

My mother is here and she can attest to the fact that in that small Pentecostal church, with its linoleum floors and hard wooden benches, with its incredible acoustics and slightly out of tune piano, that the Spirit walked the aisles, and every now and then the Spirit would nestle up next to you in the pew, and all of a sudden you'd find yourself rocking and swaying to the sound of the music. The Spirit was there in between handclaps and foot stomps, and for some reason the Spirit kept us service all day long. The Spirit comforted you after a long week at work, and it even stilled your fears over that spelling test on Monday. The Spirit showed up and showed out in a real way those Sunday mornings, if, if you were willing to wait on it. No one waits for the Spirit anymore, but waiting is precisely where we enter the text this morning.

The disciples are held up in that famous Upper Room, the original 11 plus a new addition to the team named Matthias. Mary the Mother of Jesus was there, and most likely the other Marys to, Mary Magdalene and Mary the sister of Lazarus. Martha was probably there as well, and I imagine Joanna, whom Luke mentions in his Gospel, was also there.

It was probably a tightly packed room. There couldn't have been much sitting space, and the old AC had probably given out in the heat of Ancient

Palestine. And yet there they were, waiting. Because Jesus had appeared to them, their resurrected Lord, had shown up, and given them a promise, and so there they were, waiting, and worshipping. Packed in like sardines, sitting ducks in this nondescript Upper Room these faithful few were waiting on the “promise of the Father.”

As we read this text, a millennia away from its time and context, it is easy to gleam a sense of abiding hope from the narrative, it is easy to see the budding excitement that the 2nd chapter of Acts captures as the Apostles sit in that Upper Room, waiting yet hopeful. But it occurs to me that this is the hope we use in our everyday lives, hope that is spoken with half-hearted belief, hope that isn't really expected to accomplish anything, hope that we put on for the sake of saving face, cute hope, but hope that nevertheless blows away with the coming of even the most gentle breeze. As we meet the Apostles in the Upper Room this morning, we must remember that there is terror behind this hope. There are real fears behind the hope that is on stage in the text. There is a visceral fear that the Roman Empire, those agents of death who are so adept at snatching bodies, may just be around the corner, down the stairs, or even in the room with them. And so as we turn our hearts toward the coming of the Spirit the first thing we must recognize is that

sometimes the space in between the waiting and the Spirits arrival is filled with terror.

This is not the terror that has been commercialized and commodified for public consumption on our TV screens and on our newsfeeds. This is real terror, the type of terror that can hardly be fit into words. Terror that kidnaps your peace, terror that upends your hope, terror that leaves some 58 bodies dead on the Gaza border, terror whose bullets claimed the lives of 10 people in Santa Fe, another terrorist attack that has only made the normalization of school shootings a daily reality for our children. There is real terror behind the text, the type of terror that chases you into the seclusion of an Upper Room, not sure whether you should let your light shine, or snuff it out for a sense of security.

And yet, though terror surrounds us today much like it did for those Apostles in that Upper Room, we remain hopeful even as it seems we are waiting. In this I am reminded of the words of my theology professor, the Rev. Dr. Willie Jennings: "Hope is not a feeling, hope is not a sentiment, it is something we must be disciplined by."

The second thing we must recognize is that the Spirit's coming means there is always hope, and not the cute hope of Instagram posts and "everything will be

okay". There is always hope, for this is the meaning of Pentecost, this is hope breaking back into our stories. And so the question arises friends, has hope broken into your story yet? We must be disciplined by hope, we must organize our lives, set our minds, and turn our hearts to the hope that is promised by God our creator.

Peter testifies to this disciplined hope. For it is Peter, the same Peter who was too afraid of drowning to walk on the water, the same Peter that was so afraid of the Romans that he pulled a knife on them in the Garden of Gethsemane, the same Peter who denied Jesus 3 times in the face of the crowd, this Peter stands up in front of everyone and begins to preach, he begins to share a vision born out of a defiant hope: That in the last days God will pour out God's spirit upon all flesh, and our sons and daughters shall prophesy, and our young men will see visions, our old men will dream dreams, that even the enslaved, and the mass incarcerated, and the sexually minoritized, and the undocumented, and the dislocated, the disenfranchised, and the dispossessed shall receive God's Spirit. And yes they too shall prophesy, even if we do not want to listen.

We must be disciplined by hope, even as terror is all around, for this is precisely when we are called to prophesy, this is when we are called to be on one accord. When there are Black bodies laying dead in the streets, when our LGBTQ

siblings are under assault legally and physically, when the voices of the #METOO movement are quickly joining into a cacophony of sorrow, when the ecological crisis has Winter lasting until the last weeks of April and finds Flint still drinking lead contaminated water, we are called to speak in many languages and with many tongues about the redeeming power of our great God working to make all things new. This is our work; this is our witness. Not that we take false pride in being Christians, or even being the “good Presbyterians”, not that we pat ourselves on the back for being the liberal church but that we respond to the call to be a radical church, with our very lives—going where the spirit guides us to do the work, the holy work of God. And so while we must take the terror seriously, we must never lose sight of the fact that Pentecost means hope breaking into our stories. The third thing we must recognize about the arrival of the Spirit is that it challenges us to be bold enough to vision with God.

When I was hired just over 18 months ago, David told me that the congregation had just finished a process of visioning, of seeing what new possibilities were on the horizon for the Church. You had taken the leap and sold property, reorganized staff, and began to think about what your witness to the Stamford community might look like in these new and uncertain times for the

Church. And now, on the verge of that vision coming to fruition, you may be wondering, even worrying: What Comes Next? And if I can be honest, that question, that question right there is the problem. That question does violence to visions and destroys dreams. That question and the worthless worrying that comes with it quenches the flames of the Spirit and puts God into a box, making our faith anemic and uninspired.

You have had the visions, you have had the dreams, you've felt the energy of possibility but you have put the vision away on the top shelf on the closet, thrown it behind the couch, or filed it away in fear, because you can't put it into words, work out the details, find a budget line, or convince yourself that your dreams are worth it. Beloved, though words may fail you and the next steps seem unsure, do you have the courage still to go. Perhaps you had a vision for a new business but the magnitude of the idea scared the crap out of you. Or maybe it was a college education but the rising cost of tuition and the increased frequency of a waiting list response have convinced you it's impossible. Or maybe, just maybe you had a vision to see more young people in church, to see a congregation that showed the beautiful diversity of God's creation, but people don't go to church the way they used to and now it seems like a pipe dream.

The question is never: “What Comes Next?” this question is useless, a better question is, “Who Comes Next?” For after the terror of crucifixion and the disbelief of resurrection there are always the rushing winds of hope, and that hope is found in you, each and every one of you, with your dreams and your visions, for God needs those visions. For we are the ones who are called to be Christ’s witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea, in Samaria and Stamford, and Norwalk, Greenwich, and Darien. Young and Old, cradle Christian and new Christian, God has need of your dreams. For there are people to feed, Good news that must be preached to the poor, sight that must be recovered by the blind, captives that need to be released, and the year of the Lord’s favor that must be proclaimed.

The Good News friends, is that for those of us who are disciplined by hope, for those of us who are bold enough to vision with God, we do not have to wait on the Spirit like the Apostles any longer. We do not have to wait for the Spirit to do this work, for the Spirit has already come, the Spirit has broken into our stories and is even now pushing, guiding, and praying us along the way. And so we cannot use waiting as an excuse any longer, for our waiting is not stagnant, it is active; it is the living of our lives seeking out the Spirit wherever we may find it.

But to be fair, I know that hoping and visioning can be hard, frustrating, and waiting can seem just so comfortable; the worries of “What Comes Next?” so alluring. And so I thought I’d take my own question seriously, and found myself leaning on the wisdom of my grandmother once again to come up with an answer for What Comes Next? I’ve referred to my grandmother from this pulpit before, and she hasn’t been wrong yet, for my grandmother assured me that “What Comes Next” is that the Lord will bring joy out of sorrow, that we will glean beauty from ashes. My grandmother assured me that Jesus would never leave us nor forsake us. I asked my grandmother “What Comes Next” and she reminded me that no weapon formed against us shall prosper, and indeed the Lord will beat our swords into plowshares. She reminded me that the Lord is our light and our salvation, and so whom should we fear? And even now from the pulpit of that old Pentecostal church I can still hear her singing “He’s sweet I know, storm clouds my rise, and strong winds my blow, but I’ve found a savior and he’s sweet I know.” And this Savior, Jesus our resurrected Lord promised that What Comes Next are the prophecies of our sons and daughters, the dreams of our old men and women.

And yet, even with all of my grandmother’s wisdom, even with all of these promises, What Comes Next is entirely up to you, you can stay in the Upper Room

are walk out into the streets. What Comes Next is up to you, just know that you do not have to wait on the Spirit, for the Spirit is waiting on you, the Spirit is waiting on you, to hope seriously, to vision boldly, and to be followers of Christ, wherever it may take you. Amen.