

Of Dreams and Visions  
Acts 2.1-21  
Pentecost Year B  
May 24, 2015  
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This has become my favorite Sunday of the year—the anticipation, the creativity, the range of voices, the possibilities—yet it hasn't always been on my radar. In fact, observing Pentecost wasn't part of most of my years in the church. We told the story and had the Sunday School Board drawings of the calm, fair-skinned men with dainty flames hovering above their heads. The annual telling of the Acts 2 story served as etiology—this is how the Holy Spirit came to be with the Church. Considering the safe, calm images of this scene across art history, Frank Crouch writes, “There seems to be little that would draw a crowd of onlookers or invoke much more of a summation than a simple, ‘That was weird’ before observers turn to what’s next.”<sup>1</sup>

Then I heard Bill Leonard quote the well-worn Annie Dillard musings on the church and Spirit, “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”<sup>2</sup>

I return to those words most every year when we start talking about the presence of God’s Spirit because I’ve yet to find much of a better way to describe just how little we understand of the God we reference. In churches like ours—the kinds with dignified, learned, elegant people—we like some predictability. We like a liturgy that is staid, words well thought out and thoroughly researched, music that inspires and swells *but* we’d prefer to stay right here in our seats than move around. Manuscript preachers like me want the safety of a firm pulpit and a carefully chosen turn of phrase. But today we wonder out loud what happens if we let go...

It’s only been in the past decade or so that I’ve watched other cautious, dignified pastoral teams start to branch out on this Sunday. There’s little-to-no precedent for what is expected. We start with bold colors and add some red flowers and maybe a streamer or two. It doesn’t take long before someone says, “Well that’s tacky.” Or asks, “Why do we have this *stuff* everywhere?”

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2457](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2457)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Teaching-Stone-Talk-Expeditions-Encounters/dp/0060915412>

It's a paltry attempt to capture the wild and holy wind of God's breath, but on this one Sunday of all the Sundays, we try to break the script and let go of our grip on propriety to remember that God doesn't need our rules or our structure to move. In fact, God is often moving in spite of us and beyond us. God is comfort and peace and still, small voice. God is also dreams and wind and wild imagination.

We Baptists long marked Easter Sunday as a stand-alone experience, but today is the culmination of fifty days of Easter. The disciples seem to be doing the same things we naturally do: they've replaced Judas and established their leadership team, they're making a plan for effective community engagement, they're organizing themselves as something of a mobile faith community. It's all very practical. Then God reminds them to let go of the notion that God's Way will be quite so orderly and controllable. Think: fire and prophesy and a Spirit we cannot contain.

Danielle Shroyer reflects, "Why is Pentecost important? Why is the resurrection story not completed until Acts 2? Because we are not equipped to be who God wants us to be in this new world moving toward new creation until the Spirit comes whooshing through the room. Pentecost is the day that makes the future of the church possible. Without Pentecost, we'd just be people who tell Jesus' story. With Pentecost, we're people who live into Jesus' story."<sup>3</sup>

We have been talking about this very thing on Wednesday nights through the Easter season—Living the Way of Jesus. Religious expression isn't limited to this building and isn't limited to those of us in floppy robes who take on the role of professional people of faith. If the way of Jesus is to be lived out, we asked, then what does that look like in vocation and in the way we spend our time?

One of the things that strikes me as we ask that question on *this* Sunday of all the Sundays is that living the way of Jesus is the work of all people in this church—from the very youngest to the very oldest, God's Spirit is moving around us and stirring within us and calling us out to some new place. Your young men shall see visions and your old men dream dreams...

The two groups we generally dismiss. The young entertain us...if they stay in their place. The old inspire us...if they tell the right stories. But these aren't the groups we turn to for our dreaming and visioning. We keep them in the corners and are generally glad they're around, but we trust those in the middle (not too young, not too old) with leading the way. But when the Spirit starts moving and the wind picks up, everyone's voice is to be heard and comprehended. And every person of every age will bring a word from the Divine. The call of Pentecost is a call to listen and pay attention.

Ten or twelve years ago I had the privilege of spending a day with Gordon Cosby at Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C. Church of the Saviour was organized in the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/new-testament/pentecostcnt/>

1940s as an intentionally diverse, interracial community committed to social change long before it was popular to organize around such language or such ways. The church didn't have a central building for worship and programs that served its members as most post-World War II churches did. Instead, some forty mission groups emerged; groups who worshiped, studied, and served together around D.C. addressing poverty, homelessness, racism, and inequality.

Gordon was around 85-years-old when I met him, and he gave us a tour of one of their ministry centers. Our small group sat with him for a while as he shared a little wisdom, answered our questions, and talked about his life. I mentioned becoming disillusioned by church, and he replied, "Good! That means you've been living under an illusion, and now you're not. That's when the real work begins because you can see things as they really are."

Upon Gordon's death in 2013, Brian McLaren said, "The deeper and broader legacy will be his indirect legacy on the people who were captivated by his holy unrest. That he just could never be satisfied that the church was fulfilling its potential and that the Christian faith was fulfilling its potential."<sup>4</sup>

Long after most people retire and take up golf, gardening, travel, or ordering too much from QVC, Gordon was describing the growing edge of his calling. "I sense God is leading me," he said over and over, "I sense God is leading me to this new thing." He welcomed God's Spirit in his life for a full 95 years. He expected to sense something new. He expected his call and the Church and his experience of the Divine to evolve. He dreamed dreams.

News spread quickly last week that beloved writer Phyllis Tickle<sup>5</sup> is nearing the end of her life with a stage IV lung cancer diagnosis. An expert on religion in America, it was Tickle who gave us the image of the Church's rummage sales across history—periodically going through the Church's proverbial attic and disposing of that which no longer serves. In her 80s, she has a new book coming out in June and is now one of the elders of the church who gives us a vision.

In a recent interview, Tickle was asked to respond to trends in American religious identity noted by the Pew Forum and most everyone else, and she exclaimed, "'Christianity isn't going to die!' ...almost offended at the suggestion. 'It just birthed out a new tributary to the river. Christianity is reconfiguring,' she says. 'It's almost going through another adolescence. And it's going to come out a better, more mature adult. There's no question about that.'"

There are voices all around us, guiding us to a fuller way of being. Let go of the illusion and see things as they really are. Sense the new thing to which God is calling you. Follow

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2013/04/14/177218091/pastor-mentor-and-social-activist-remembering-gordon-cosby>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.phyllistickle.com/about/>

the new tributary to the river. Let the Spirit carry you as she dances and moves and reconfigures the things we have constructed.

We mark the birthday of the church today but fail to understand fully that the birth was wild and loud and confusing. People rushed to the noise and could not make sense of what they were seeing and hearing. Their response was to identify a birthing of something new. The scene before them was the stuff of visions and dreams and the end of all things—surely life as they knew it was coming to an end.

That is not an easy or comfortable reality.

They could no longer live under the illusion that their lives and ministry would be the same as before Jesus' death. Things had changed forever, and the way forward was unclear.

There are obvious implications in all of this for the church—how we value and listen to the range of voices in our midst, how we respond to the changes and movements of Spirit and reconfiguration, how we release our need for control and trust a process that is beyond us and cannot be predicted, how we welcome all people of all ages not just to join us but to lead us and teach us and serve as partners of The Spirit.

Yet these stories are of personal response, too.

How does God show up in your life? How do you feel the movement of the Spirit? What creative calling is working its way into your days right now? What reconfiguration requires both death of old ways before new life can emerge?

For me, God most often shows up in unexpected relationships. A man named Harvey walked into my office a year ago in search of some honest conversation, and he has fast become a truth-teller in my life. He is the kind of person who sees what is really going on and doesn't make small talk. He cuts right to the heart of a question and has a certain way of knowing about him. He splits his time between Southern California and New Orleans, and I never know quite when he'll pop up around here. Several months ago I was stuck in my head thinking over and over about difficulty that we must address even when we don't know the way forward. I was walking through the grocery store with thoughts rapidly zooming through my brain when I looked up and saw Harvey. Of course. One of those kind faces that shows up at just the right time. And because he is one who sees, there is no use in pretending things are just fine.

And so I told him I was feeling stuck about the challenges facing churches today and crises abounding in our nation and across the globe. Stuck in not knowing how people of differing ideologies can hear one another and partner together if their basic worldviews are in opposition. Stuck in not being confident of institutional Christianity's flexibility or response time. I was trying to figure out how to turn that stuckness into conversation or some kind of action in my life and in the world. Because I know that somehow my response as a faith leader to all that swirls within and around the Church will be part of

the death of an old way the Church has been as well as a new way the Church is growing to be. My career will not be as simple as plugging in the right programming for the right context. Now is a time of innovation, creativity, truth-telling and down-sizing. That's scary. It's not easy. It's certainly not comfortable.

He thought about it for a couple of days and then came back with this: adversity leads to creativity and creativity to lovingkindness. In the language of the church, the way to life is first through death. The way of the spirit is creative rebirth. Then the ways of kindness and love, those fruits of Spirit we learned as children, emerge all around.

The disciples found themselves in a new and uncertain place, and their instinct was to grab what they already knew and repurpose it. But God's Spirit blasted through the place where they were gathered to shake them into a new way of living, being, and doing. God's way is continually making old things new, and God invites us into that work. Today is a day for embracing the Divine creativity and welcoming its dramatic rearrangement into our lives.

Today is a day of naming the adversities before us in our personal lives and in the life of this congregation. Pick an image: a new tributary is leading us to the river, God is writing a new story in our lives, we are releasing old illusions and seeing what really is before us. And that is hard work. But that hard work is guided by the whirling wind of God's Spirit with us. That hard work invites us into the fullness of God's creativity. In God's imagination, when things get creative, everything and everyone is an outlet for accessing the fullness of God's story if we will open ourselves up to notice. Listen for the dreams and the visions, welcome the truth-tellers and the seers, embrace the fiery movement of the Divine, and trust that God's goodness abounds—even in places we have not yet dared to imagine.