

Winds of Change
First Sunday of Pentecost

June 8, 2014

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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

TIM MOON:

[Acts 2-Pentecost in New Orleans]

When the day of the Jazz Service arrived, they were all gathered in the courtyard. Then all of a sudden there came from the sky a rumbling wind, like right before a hurricane, and it filled the whole space where they were gathered. And they saw flames spread like lightning across the sky, and heard that low hiss and crackle, like a camp fire. The flames settled upon everyone, and they were bursting with Holy Spirit and started talking in whatever different languages the Spirit directed.

Because of Mardi Gras, there were many visitors gathered in New Orleans, religious people from countries all over the world. So when they heard this great noise, they all came running together. And then they heard these folks talking to everyone in their own native tongue, and were they excited! Amazed and astounded to no end, they said "Look, aren't all these speakers Americans? Then how is it that each of us is hearing it in his own native tongue-French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Chinese, Russian, Italian, Greek, Turkish, Hebrew, Swedish, Arabic, Hindi-in our own languages we are hearing them tell of God's mighty doings." Everybody was dumbfounded and puzzled, saying one to another, "What's the meaning of this?" But others sneered, "They've been hitting the Sazeracs."

So Pete, along with the eleven, got right up and started explaining matters to them: "Fellow Louisianans and all you guests in New Orleans, let me set you straight on this right now. These folks are not drunk like you think, because it's just nine o'clock in the morning. We haven't even had a parade yet today! Instead, this is the happening described in the prophecy of Joel:

When the time is ripe, says God, I will share my spirit with all humankind, and your sons and your daughters will speak the truth. Your young people will catch visions and your old people will dream new dreams. Yes, indeed, when the time is ripe I'll share my spirit. With my boys and my girls and they will speak the truth. And I will put

terrors in the sky above and nightmares on the earth below- blood and fire and a mushroom cloud. The sun will be turned into blackness and the moon into blood, when the glory and the majesty of the Lord's Era will be ushered in. And then, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be liberated into God's freedom and peace.

Adapted from *Cotton Patch Gospel* by Clarence Jordan and *The Voice Bible*

ELIZABETH LOTT:

“When ancient man confronted the mystery of death, which is also the mystery of life—when he looked at the body of a dead man and compared it with himself as a living man and wondered what terrible change had come over it—one of the first things that struck him apparently was that whereas he himself, the living man, breathed, the dead man did not breathe. There was no movement of the chest. A feather held to his lips remained unstirred. So to be dead meant to have no breath, and to be alive—to have the power to rise up and run and shout in the world—meant to have breath. And the conclusion, of course, was that breath is not just the little wisps of air that men breathe in and out, but that it is the very animating power of life itself. Breath is the livingness of those who are alive. This is why in so many languages the word for breath comes to mean not only the air that fills the lungs but the mystery and power of life itself that fills a living person. Such is the Latin word *spiritus*, from which our word ‘spirit’ comes.

Each one of us has a spirit, this power of life in us, and like breath it is not just something that is in us but something that also issues from us. Every [one] has the capacity, more at some times than others, to project some of this power of [one's] own life, [one's] vitality, into others. It is the power literally to in-spire, breathe into, and although it is invisible and intangible and cannot be put into a test tube or under a microscope, it is perhaps the greatest and most dangerous power that we have.”

Frederick Buechner, “The Breath of Life” from *The Magnificent Defeat*¹

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*: “The Breath of Life” (Harper San Francisco, 1966), pp. 110-115

STEPHANIE COYNE:

Right before the musical production begins, before the curtain opens up, there is always a time for the individual musician to warm up—to practice a difficult run of notes, to remember again a correct breathing pattern—and for everyone to be in exact tune with the oboe’s A, the “concert pitch.” During the warm-up period, if you focus your ears on one sound, you might be able to identify what you are hearing, but overall, the sounds are chaos. And then, the first note strikes and it all comes together—the cacophony becomes melodious and beautiful and it all makes sense.

ELIZABETH LOTT:

It all makes sense at different times and in different ways. That’s why the prophet Joel spoke of prophesy, visions and dreams. We encounter the Spirit uniquely. For poet Antonio Machado, it’s in the dreaming:

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that a spring was breaking
out in my heart.
I said: Along which secret aqueduct,
water of a new life
that I have never drunk?

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures.

Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
That a fiery sun was giving

light inside my heart.
It was fiery because I felt
warmth as from a hearth
and sun because it gave light
and brought tears to my eyes.

Last night, as I slept,
I dreamt—marvelous error!—
that it was God I had
here inside my heart.²

TIM MOON:

[Southwest China, July 2008]

I have grown into the rhythms of life here in rural China. I am about half way into my 6 week mentoring with missionaries here. While sitting in a classroom at Baylor, the idea of doing holistic, cross-cultural ministry on a farm in southwest China sounded like a dream come true for me, but in reality, I feel uprooted, disoriented. Each day I wake up, eat weird food, sit through a Bible lesson in Chinese, eat weird lunch while locals help me with the art of chopsticking, work on the farm, eat a weird snack, play ping-pong or soccer, eat one last weird meal, 2 hour prayer meeting (once again in another language), then off to bed. And the nights are so dark and so lonely. There is no electricity, no one to talk to, nothing to do, except sit with my thoughts. Without being able to converse, I spend most of my day in my head. Having conversations with myself, thinking too many thoughts, over-analyzing everything. And while I hear voices all day, I understand none of them, while I see the same people each day, I feel so alone, while I speak, I receive confused or quizzical looks which make me know I am not being heard. It is quite a feat to be in the most populated country on earth, yet feel so completely alone.

This rhythm of not being heard always lead me back to the nights where the questions creep in. Why would God put me here? Where is God? What am I doing with my life? I feel like humans are not meant to face this much silence, or maybe our fast paced

² Antonio Machado from *Life Prayers from Around the World* (Harper Collins San Francisco, 1996), pp. 371-372

culture has made us too uncomfortable with it. In the hustle and bustle of normal life, I take for granted how easy it is to communicate with others, but that is a lost luxury when everyone speaks Mandarin, or Wa, but not English. And all the silence makes me wonder why God isn't speaking to me either. I mean, I don't really hear God audibly speak to me, but shouldn't I sense something, shouldn't I feel something, right? I continue to pray and read scripture, but it has become so routine, so stale for me. I just wonder where God is? One dark night, as I read by the light of my head lamp, I am reminded that the story of God's people is one of remembering. In the midst of darkness, God's people have always remembered God's acts in their lives. The Jews in exile remembered the Exodus, the first generation Christians remembered the risen Christ. And today, we remember the teachings of Christ, we remember the outpouring of the Spirit. And in a personal sense, I remember how the way of Christ changed me from a self-centered only child into one capable of loving outside myself. I remember going on mission trips in high school and that this process gave me a sense of calling to become a minister. I remember little moments of unexplainable peace when the world around me seemed so harsh and cold. And this comforts me. While I may not feel or see God here and now, I have learned to accept the darkness. Because in my own history as well as the history of God's people, I am reminded of God's movement, and I eagerly wait for the Spirit's next outpouring in my midst. Just because I haven't seen God's Spirit moving, doesn't mean I'm not expectant for that next Pentecost moment. My distress gives way to hope, and I wait... I wait ... I wait.

ELIZABETH LOTT:

In recent weeks we have been reminded that we do not wait alone. The stuff of the Spirit is the same stuff of Immanuel: God With Us. This word "spirit," we recall, is interchangeable in scripture with the words "breath" and "wind." Frederick Buechner reminds us just how significant it is to say that God is near to us as Spirit; near to us as Breath.

"To say that God is spirit is to say that life does care, that the life-giving power that life itself comes from is not indifferent as to whether we sink or swim. It wants us to swim. It is to say that whether you call this life-giving power the Spirit of God or Reality or the Life Force or anything else, its most basic characteristic is that it wishes us well and is at work toward that end.

Heaven knows terrible things happen to people in this world. The good die young, and the wicked prosper, and in any one town, anywhere, there is grief enough to freeze the blood. But from deep within, whatever the hidden spring is, that life wells up from, there wells up into our lives, even at their darkest and maybe especially then, a power to heal, to breathe new life into us. And in this regard, I think, every [person] is a mystic because every [person] at one time or another experiences in the thick of joy or pain the power out of the depths of life to bless. I do not believe that it matters greatly what you call this power—the Spirit of God is only one of its names—but what I think does matter, vastly, is that we open ourselves to receive it; that we move in the direction that it seeks to move us, the direction of fuller communion with itself and with one another.” Frederick Buechner, “The Breath of Life” from *The Magnificent Defeat*³

STEPHANIE COYNE:

I’m not sure who I would have been that day—a skeptic or a believer. I feel confident that I would have waited in the back until I could get a handle on the situation. I love playing the part of the cautious observer, remaining in control in the midst of a chaotic scene. But I also feel confident that after the flurry of sounds began, when all the languages began to sound at once, I feel confident that I would have turned my ear and perhaps leaned in a little closer, hoping to hear my own language. I would want it to be spoken because I would have wanted to somehow be a part of the chaos. I would have wanted to understand.

ELIZABETH LOTT:

Our compulsion to know and understand the works of God is an element of the human experience. In 1370, Catherine of Siena famously encountered God and cried out:

“You, God, are a fire that always burns without consuming. You are a fire consuming in its heat every compartment of the soul’s self-absorbed love. You are a fire lifting all chill and giving all light. In Your light You show me Your truth. You’re the Light that outshines every light.

³ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*: “The Breath of Life” (Harper San Francisco, 1966), pp. 110-115

You, God, give the mind's eye Your divine light so completely and excellently, You bring lucidity even to the light of faith. In that faith, I see my soul has life, and in that light, I receive You who are Light itself." ⁴

STEPHANIE COYNE:

The Old is merging with the New.

The Jewish people have come to Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot, the celebration of God's giving of the Torah. And Peter, the disciples, and other followers of Jesus have also come to Jerusalem, trying to figure out what life after Jesus' Ascension might look like.

This juxtaposition of these two gatherings of people must be significant; this must be more than coincidence. Practically, lots of people turned out to be in the same place and therefore, lots of people were witnesses to the strange scene that occurs with Peter and the disciples. But there is more here, there is movement here, a shifting. The literary inclinations woven through the text ask us to consider the people, the tradition, the multitude of languages, the reference to Joel's prophecy.

In the middle of Shavuot, a time when the first fruits of harvest are being brought to the altar in thanksgiving, God interrupts the feast....

The wind begins, bands of fire seem to rush down and then everyone begins to speak. But it is chaos.

Can you imagine being a bystander? Brows must have furrowed, heads must have turned, people must have stopped in their tracks. *What? What are they saying? What does this mean?* And then, after a few moments, *Wait. That guy is speaking my language.*

After the speculators speculate, Peter offers them explanation as Jesus offered explanation so many times, through Hebrew Scriptures. Peter draws from the Old to help interpret the New: "This is what you are hearing! The Holy Spirit has come and *all* will prophesy, see visions, and dream."

⁴ Catherine of Siena, *A Little Daily Wisdom: Christian Women Mystics* (Paraclete Press, 2008), p. 127

Many of the Israelites expected that God would give a Messiah that would establish a political kingdom. They believed that he would be king.

But this is New. God's wisdom is not imparted to a King. God's wisdom is not spoken in one language to one nation. God is not making one nation. God is acknowledging the scattered; God's wisdom is available to *all*.

We are not dropping Shavuot. We are not simply hijacking the festival and calling it Pentecost and therefore making the celebration ours alone. We will not forget to bring our first fruits, our loaves of bread, our talents to the altar. We are not neglecting the past. We are not forgetting that God made a commitment long ago. Rather, we are renewing our commitment to God and praise be, God is renewing a commitment to us. Old women and young men both move forward in this gift together and along with our first fruits we will also bring our dreams and our prophecies in thanksgiving to God. Joel's words still are true for us today—the rumblings of the Holy Spirit are still present with us today.

What are some of the dreams and prophecies of our pasts, our ghosts? What are some of the dreams and prophecies of our aged, ourselves, our children? Wisdom is not given to just one of us. Let us move forward, lean closer, and incline our ears that we might hear the language we know best!...Let us hear the Spirit speak to us and let us share what we have heard with one another!

TIM MOON:

[Peter, A few weeks after Pentecost]

So much has happened since Pentecost. The Spirit is moving, enabling, pushing the limits. I mean just a few months ago I was denying Jesus, and now everyone looks to me. I mean don't get me wrong, I'm still far from perfect, but the Spirit is working, changing me, and I am just trying to keep up. If you had told me a week ago that I would be baptizing a gentile centurion and his family, I'd say you were crazy. But we just welcomed the Spirit in Cornelius moments ago. And the Spirit isn't just changing new followers, it's transforming us all. The Spirit feels like the warmth of sitting around the fire talking with Jesus, but now it's somehow within me, moving through me sometimes like a gentle breeze and other times like a gust. The explosion of the Spirit at Pentecost was just the beginning. We are seeing little glimpses of Pentecost

almost everyday. Today, not only did something stir within Cornelius, something stirred within me, something is stirring within us all. I changed, we all changed. Our dreams got a little larger, a little fuller, and it seems this is the way of the Spirit's work. This Jesus way is growing, it's changing, and it's not only in our hands now. I can't wait to see what's next, how God's dreams will become our dreams. How the Spirit will open the gates wider so that everyone might know they are the beloved of God! And until the next Pentecost moment, we wait...

ELIZABETH LOTT: We wait...

STEPHANIE COYNE: We wait...