

Bursting Forth

Pentecost Sunday

June 6, 2011

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Texts: Acts 2.1-21;
Psalm 104;
1 Corinthians 12.3b-13
John 7.37-39

When I was in college my housemate, Kori, spent a year in Spain. She didn't live anywhere near a major city and not a single soul for miles spoke a word of English. I know that many of you think of me as young but this was before cell phones, internet, or satellite TV, so very little about the lifestyle or surroundings reminded her of home. She loved it at first. This is why she came – to be immersed in the language and culture. But over time she began to feel incredibly lonely. And more than lonely, she began to feel as if no one could really understand her fully. There was something lost in translation it seemed. On a trip to a metropolitan area she stumbled upon some tourists speaking English. She rushed to them and embraced them as if they were long-lost family. Never mind that these new-found soul mates were people with whom she had nothing in common. To hear her own voice in her own tongue and to be seen and heard and understood – it overwhelmed her.

As I listen to the Pentecost text, I think of her experience. I think of what it was like for these ex-patriots living in Jerusalem to suddenly hear their own language being spoken. And not just to stumble upon some tourists from their home town chatting about the weather, but to hear the disciples speaking about the mysteries of God in the language of their soul. My sense is that the power of this experience – at least for some - was not primarily about the mystery of how this was happening even if that was their initial reaction. The power for them comes as the Spirit presents the unfolding story of God's relentless pursuit of humankind and they hear in this story the truth. In listening to the disciples speak about the powerful deeds of God, somehow they heard the story of their own lives.

Suzanne Vega is a singer/songwriter I've loved for a number of years. On one of her older albums there is a song entitled "Blood Sings." She describes people in varying degrees of isolation. In one verse she sings of seeing the pictures of a boy growing up through the years and tracking how his eyes grow colder as the pictures go. The chorus begins, "How did this come to pass? How did this one life fall so far so fast?" Kind of a depressing line of thought. But then she offers some hope: "When blood sees blood of its own...It sings to see itself again...It sings to hear the voice it's known...It sings to recognize the face."¹

I doubt that Suzanne Vega had in mind the human condition after the fall of creation but that is what I hear in her song: this sense of being alone in the world and of never really feeling at home. What she envisions as salvation is the opportunity to finally find blood of our blood and flesh of our flesh....to find a companion or a community in whose eyes we see ourselves and come to know ourselves as loved. Anneka, Madeline, Griffin – as you come to profess your faith today, I hope that you do so in part because you have found this community to be that kind of place for you. As we prepared to search for a youth ministry director, we had to clarify for ourselves what we see as the heart and soul of our youth ministry, and while there are a number of dimensions that are important to us this was the center of it: that the young people who come up in this place or come into this community can find a place where they belong and can come to see themselves the way that that God sees us as created from divine breath and commissioned (as we have done for you today) for divine purpose.

Did you notice on the day of Pentecost how this whole experience began? This commissioning was not ushered in by some gentle invitation to come and listen. The Spirit's arrival comes bursting forth onto the scene like the rush of violent wind. And I realize that for some of us at certain moments that description is exactly right. The experience of hearing the Word of God and believing it to be True – coming to recognize our own story in the unfolding God's Story – that kind of realization can blow over our lives with the force of a violent wind uprooting everything in us that does not belong. Or to think in terms of the other image of the day; burning away

¹ Suzanne Vega from the album 99.9F°, 1992.

every part of us that keeps God's Word from taking root. To recognize the purpose and destiny of your own life as you hear the account of God's deeds of power – that ought to blow our minds a bit and awaken some anxious wondering in our hearts. Because there is no way we can give ourselves over to the Word of God and expect our lives to remain the same.

The Church was created in this moment as the Spirit was poured out and we are now charged to re-present this Word of God to the world. All of our students professing their faith today seemed to grasp this truth: that the Spirit makes a claim on us in our baptism. Not just that we are marked as Christ's own and have place where we belong, but that we are sent out as disciples of Christ and commissioned by the Spirit to live our faith in a way that makes a difference in the world. Anneka writes in her credo: "As a child of God, I shall put my heart and my faith into everything I do. I am called to help others and to use my life to improve the lives of others." Griffin affirms that love and care we are to offer extends "to all the good gifts God gives us including the planet on which we live." Madeline expresses the purpose we all have as "spreading the love of God through actions and words – coming together to fix some of what is wrong in the world the way that God wants us to do."

How will each of you (each of us) do that? That's the question isn't? When I think about the diverse, interesting, compelling ways that each of you live out your faith in the places where you live, it inspires me. When I think that our little community of faith is just one of 170 houses of worship in Holland – which is a small city in western Michigan – just a small part of this vast nation in which we live which is only one country in North America – think about the scope of the world and then go backward and forward in time and consider how the Spirit is moving....it blows your mind. The Spirit is still being poured out. As Jesus said in the gospel of John today, it is now "out of believers' hearts" that the Spirit shall flow.

The work of the Spirit is the same. It is the work of empowerment. Peter found his voice that day. He couldn't confess Christ to a single servant girl in the dead of night a few weeks before and now he addresses the crowds in the middle of the day. The community also found their purpose that day. The stories that follow this event in the book of Acts make clear that

they did not just hear the Word of God but they began to embody it by taking their faith to the street. It changed how they spent their time, their relationship to their possessions, and their sense of commitment to the poor. We are called to be a force of God in the world.

And we are to do so in ways that reflect who God has created each one of us to be (as the passage from Corinthians makes clear). The closing article in Perspectives magazine in May was written by Daniel Meeter reflecting on the meaning of Pentecost. He was remembering that Pentecost was first a Jewish festival to celebrate the Torah – the gift of the law – the call to love God and love neighbor as yourself. And he quoted Von Ruler, a Dutch theologian who once said that “God practices what God preaches. We are God’s neighbors. And God rejoices in us being us. That’s how God celebrates Pentecost.”²

The Spirit burst forth on that day and is still bursting forth. And it begins as God rejoices in who you are and in what you bring to this table and what you will do as you go forth from this place.

The Spirit is alive; poured out on all flesh. So Happy Birthday!

² Dan Meeter, *Catenary: The Curve of the Hanging Chain*, Perspectives Magazine, May 2011.