



It Never Lasts, Does It?

TEXT
Acts 2:1-13

June 9, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Pentecost was a Jewish holiday, and folks came from all over to celebrate this high holy day. Holidays are great. Part of what makes them great is the traditions. So, folks thought they knew what to expect, but on this particular Pentecost, the Spirit of God pushed passed the traditions and did something that made it like no other day.

The disciples were in hiding because the powers that crucified Jesus were still “the powers,” and the disciples were afraid. Fear is a terrible thing. We are never our best selves when we are afraid; or, at least, we are never our best selves when we act out of our fear. But this was some day. People who started the day in fear soon found a courage that changed everything.

They were huddled in an upper room, and the Spirit of God blew upon them so powerfully you could see it: tongues of fire on every head. The Spirit of God blew upon them so powerfully you could hear it. It sounded like rushing wind.

Then these timid followers became leaders. They moved into the crowds that had gathered to observe Pentecost. There were Parthians and Medes and

Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Asians and Arabs. They were from everywhere — I mean *everywhere*. And these Galilean disciples began to speak their language. And the people were astonished. They said, “How is it that we understand these guys? They are talking our language.” And it says that about 3,000 people joined the church on Pentecost — 3,000 people in one day.

My careful and caring assistant Marsha keeps the Session records for Village. I asked her to look through the minutes and tell me the last time we had 3,000 people join Village Church. She said, “It’s been some time.”

The Bible tells of amazing moments, astonishing works of God’s Spirit; but sadly, they never seem to last. I’ve never heard of another day like this. Makes you wonder if the Spirit acts like this anymore.

The truth is, Pentecost is not my favorite church holiday. I know it’s supposed to be a party, a birthday party of sorts, but the story of this day makes me wonder if we are missing something. Church doesn’t look like that anymore. Has God’s Spirit lost her A-game, or worse, gone into retirement? We don’t have days like this.

Early in my ministry, we prepared for Pentecost Sunday. We had red balloons tied to the ends of the pews and flowers up front. The table was set. It was going to be perfect. No fancy languages, and we didn’t have anyone joining the church, but it looked like a party in a Presbyterian kind of way.

But as folks settled into the pews, some would slide their arm over the ends, and it dislodged some of the balloons. They raced toward the ceiling. Every now and then, another balloon would launch.

The sacristy guild had set the Communion out on Saturday night. To keep the bread fresh, they put it in a baggie, so as the trays were passed, you had to first rip open the baggie. And about that time, some of those balloons began to find the ceiling lights, resulting in periodic explosions which scared the children; their parents took them sobbing from the room. It didn’t feel like the Spirit showed up. It just feels like Pentecost sets us up to fail.

Maybe I’m complaining.

In the church in which I grew up, there was a man named Gene. He complained all the time. He seemed happiest when he was complaining. If you said, “Gene,

how's it going?" you would be certain to hear, "You know me, I'm no stranger to suffering." In fact, he seemed to be suffering most of the time.

"I hear you went to the beach, Gene."

"Yeah, I'll never do that again. Got sunburned the first day. I used sunblock, but it streaked; I looked like a candy cane."

"Gene, did you get a new car?"

"Yes, but it's white. They only had a white one, and you know how they show the dirt. I'll have to wash it all the time, but that's OK. You won't hear me complaining."

Even if things were going pretty well, he knew it was just a matter of time. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it, Gene?"

"Oh, yeah, now maybe. But it's supposed to get hot this weekend; gonna melt your hair. You just wait. But you won't hear me complaining, no sir."

I read the story of Pentecost, and it turns me into Gene. They moved out into the world and spoke new languages, and the whole world turns into a Billy Graham crusade singing *Just as I Am*.

This is a day we can celebrate, but I'm not sure we can relive it. It makes you wonder if the Spirit acts like this anymore.

So, what do we do with a day like this? Some have tackled this problem by pointing out that the story involves hyperbole. Three thousand, really? Come on. Really, not 2,758?

Not only that, the collection of folks gathered there was quite astonishing. There were Parthi-

ans and Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Asians and Arabs. Well, for some of these folks, it was quite a trip. How far did the Asians travel?

But that's nothing compared to the Medes, for example. They not only had to travel several hundred miles, but several hundred years, since the Medes had been removed from the pages of history centuries earlier. The same is true of the Elamites. There hadn't been an Elamite in years. How did they get there?¹

Reading Acts is like reading the *Good News* and finding the list of new members. Village Church is pleased to welcome the Smith family from Fairway, and the Johnston family joins us from Denver. We are particularly pleased to welcome the Williams' and their children who travel to us from Chicago to join our Antioch Campus. We welcome President Abraham Lincoln as a new member, who joins us by reaffirmation of faith. The Session is also pleased that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has agreed to preach next week at all services.

What? Luke says everyone — and I mean *everyone* — was part of the church on Pentecost. If I understand the text, it declares the Spirit would leave no one out. God's Spirit will cross every mile and every time to include God's children in the church. **This is not a news report; this is a declaration of ideals.** A proper celebration of Pentecost is to remember the ideals of the church.

This past week, we observed the 75th anniversary of D-Day.

There were interviews with boys who stormed that beach; they are men in their 90s now. There were graves, marked with dignity. There were speeches and flyovers and, even 75 years later, a few tears. It was a one-of-a-kind day.

But what does it mean? If we looked to D-Day as the day the U.S. and Allies turn the tide of the war around and the beginning of the end of the war, you would be right on one level. But you would miss something else altogether — because D-Day was a day of sacrifice for the right of ordinary people to participate in their government. D-Day was a day of sacrifice to strike against the demonic notion that some people are born in a super race and others were created lacking by their Creator.

Those boys didn't bleed and die just so our team could win, as much as some might make it sound that way. They bled and died that these and other ideals might not vanish from the earth.

The amazing thing about Pentecost was not the miracle of language or the astonishing numbers, but the ideals. We need this to remind us what the church is for.

This past week, Rodger and I held some talk-back conversations about our sermon series on race. Many of you came. One of you asked a thoughtful question: Why did you choose to talk about this now?

Well, in part because we see practices of racism these days with a clarity that we haven't for some time. But more than that, because we are Village. Vil-

lage has always been concerned when our neighbors suffer. At our conversation on Wednesday, some guests joined us. These guests pointed out that Village has always been in the battle for justice. They said that we look to you for this.

And I remembered again the leadership of Dr. Bob and the housing covenants. And I remembered the bold decision to invest \$100,000 in the Black Motivational Training Center. It was over 10 percent of the budget in 1970.² But if you ask me, it was a Pentecost day, and the Spirit was moving.

I was visiting with Joe, not long before he died. He said one of the most meaningful things in his life was the family he hosted after Katrina. You opened your homes and cared for folks so shocked they could barely care for themselves. ... The Spirit was at work among us.

Later this month, we will celebrate the second anniversary of our campus at Antioch. That campus is there because you know there are far too many churches who want to define themselves by who they keep out, and you are willing to sacrifice to make sure this decision to launch Antioch was a Pentecost day.

I could go on, but you probably have your own Pentecost moment.

Have we ever learned to speak foreign languages overnight? No, but we are learning to meet people where they are and to share good news in a way they can hear it. Have we ever had 3,000 people join the church

in one day? Marsha says no, not yet. But time and again we have remembered what we are here for. And in those times, if you listen, you might hear the Spirit blowing. For she has not retired, and she is still on her A-game, working with ordinary, sometimes frightened folks like us, to remind the world why God wants a people who live like the church.

¹This biblical study is reported in Tom Long's "A Night at the Burlesque: Wanderings Through the Pentecost Narrative," *Journal for Preachers: Pentecost* (1991), p. 28f.

²This story can be found in Phyllis Matchette's *The Village Story* (1996), pp. 62–65.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.