

## “Spirit of Joy: Christ in You”

Rev. Jamie Norwich McLennan

---

A man whispered, “God speak to me!” and a dog barked. (*chimes*) But the man didn’t hear.

So the man called out, “God speak to me!” and thunder rolled across the sky (*Chimes*). But the man didn’t listen.

The man looked around and said, “God let me see you!” and a star shone brightly (*chimes*). But the man didn’t see.

Despairingly the man said, “God show me a miracle” and a child was born (*chimes*). But the man didn’t notice.

Desperate now, the man said, “Love me God”, and his partner smiled at him. But that was so normal, he missed it (*Chimes*).

Feeling completely alone he whispered into the heavens, “Touch me God and let me know you are here!” God reached down and touched the man (*Chimes*). But the man brushed the butterfly away and went sadly on his way.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day when we celebrate that the Holy Spirit came into the lives of the disciples in such a way that their lives were transformed; and not only were their lives transformed, so too were the lives of thousands who were with them when the moment occurred. We tend to think of the day as momentous and the experience as amazing, but what if it were as simple as the events listed in the poem shared a moment ago?

Last Sunday, Pastor Larry and Chuck Leypoldt shared with us the stories of John and Charles Wesley in the week just before Pentecost. John Wesley spoke those historical words, “my heart was strangely warmed;” Charles spoke of having heart palpitations. John had his experience as he was listening to familiar words of scripture at a time when he was feeling far away from God. Was it coincidence that the timing of these experiences were around Pentecost, or is there something in the season that opens us to being receptive to the touch of God in new and different ways? I don’t think that there is any “magic” in the timing of Wesley brothers’ experience of God on those two occasions, except that transformation most often happens when we are prepared/preparing for it to happen. Think with me about the preparation John and Charles were in the midst of when they each had their experience of the Holy touching their lives.

In the northern hemisphere where we live, Easter comes in the Spring...Pentecost follows 50 days later...Church of England priests John and Charles Wesley are preparing to preach about this moment of amazement to their congregations...Charles has his moment of heart palpitations and shares them with John...who three days later speaks of a similar experience of his heart; sibling rivalry may have been a part of John’s preparation to feel the Spirit moving within him, or not, but when one person experiences something profound, it is not uncommon to have others follow suit. I have watched this happen at revivals...and on retreats...at church camps and even just around a campfire. Is it too much of a surprise that the Wesley brothers experience God at this time in the church’s liturgy?

Like a movie director, the author of the book of Acts whom we name Luke, creates an imaginative scene of wind and fire... and noise and chaos. The masterful storyteller gives us plenty of details to get caught up in; the crowd hears the cacophony of voices, many speaking in different languages (*play the recording from AliveNow with the multiplicity of voices reading*

*part of the Pentecost text...*). The Apostles are filled with such delight and joy that they are seen to be drunk—for why else would one be so full of joy at that time of day and in such circumstances? Whatever historical events may or may not lay behind the story 2000 years ago, we have a script full of symbolism and metaphor which is best to not take literally.

Pentecost is the day we celebrate the visitation of the Holy Spirit upon the Elders of the Early Christian Church. They felt an enormous outpouring of the Spirit of God in their hearts and souls. Joy came flooding into their lives in a way they never expected to experience it—particularly given their recent experiences with crucifixion and death. However it happened... whatever happened... it caused feelings of joy, and terror, and excitement; the event stirred them up into new life and the Followers of the Jesus Way became a living being—one that we have named The Church.

Pentecost is about allowing the breath of God to fill every fiber of nature, and of our being, in every moment of our matter-energy, space-time, and existence. Pentecost is a day for being surprised and fully enlivened by creativity, energy, new life. It is a day of delight!

This imaginative Pentecost story is also about hearing and experiencing the creative life of God in a language we can understand. Not just in English or French or German or any of the Asian or Pacific or native languages, but also in the language of such social issues as reconciliation, un- and under-employment, global marketing, and the ecological crisis. It is not just experiencing the creative energy of God in the spoken word, but in song, and dance, and images as well. What was once dead is now alive—and the new life is breath-taking and magnificent!

What a difference a day can make! For John Wesley, it was the beginning of a new church, not just a renewal movement for an existing church. For Charles, it was the creative spark that gave new energy to his poetry and matched words and tunes so that the people called “Methodist” became a singing people.

The Pentecost story is more than a so-called past 'event'. It is relevant in today's experiences, too. It continues to be the story of creativity, The story of God who indwells and sustains all life forms: Galaxy. Organism. Individual atom. God not 'incarnate' in just one person, but becoming incarnate in all of us. Christ in us... as we dream dreams and see a vision of justice and compassion and responsibility in the world.

We hear this, not in the babble of unknown tongues, but in the gift of many languages so that many people can hear and understand. We understand the gift of the Holy Spirit in the ability to hear and speak a challenging word, a loving word; to understand it, to celebrate it, and to tell it in the uniqueness of our own passionate living.

So how might Pentecost be understood today, in 21st century America? Perhaps by remembering: "God the Spirit enfleshed in all of creation... in you and me and given voice in the things about which we are most passionate."

A number of years ago, I was visiting with a friend who lives in Chicago. We were talking about the state of her soul—and how she felt that her spirit was languishing. She told me that she felt farther from God than she had in a very long time. Her husband, who is a Christian Psychologist, had told her it was because of her prideful sin in her singing voice. I was rather shocked by this statement and so began to ask questions about how she was using this lovely instrument that God had given her.

With great sadness, she said, “I just direct the church choir now; I've stopped singing. I don't want to keep sinning by enjoying the gift of my voice.”

I was completely flabbergasted. This lovely woman is gentle and humble—and with the voice of an angel. “But Patti,” I said in amazement, “singing is your best way of praying! No wonder you feel so far from God...”

Patti looked at me with tears in her eyes. “Do you really think so?” she asked timidly. “Yes!” I affirmed with as much passion as I have affirmed anything, partially because I love singing, and I would give much to have a voice like Patti’s. “That may not be true for some, but I have no doubt that music is your prayer.” We talked for a little while longer, but I had to catch my train back to Omaha. When I called Patti a couple of weeks later, she told me of the changes in her life; music was once again a part of her daily practice. (*singing*) “It is well...with my soul...” She had acknowledged the gift of the Spirit in her music and experienced a Pentecost moment that transformed her back into a person who experienced joy in the love of God, sharing that joy and love with others.

More recently a young man experienced the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Josef Miles, a 9-year old who lives in Topeka, Kansas, felt the Spirit of God move in his heart when he and his mother drove past a protest put on by Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church. He saw their protest signs proclaiming that “God Hates...” and fill in the blanks, because for this group there are so many different things that God hates.

Josef asked his mother if he could make a sign, and with a small pad of paper and a pencil, he made a sign that says “God Hates No One”. With this statement of inclusion, Josef began to walk amongst the demonstrators who proclaimed God hating various peoples and groups. He did so, with peace and passion for God’s love in his heart. (*Chime*) “God Hates No One.” His mother says that her son is a fine young man, and she loves to learn from him every day. The Spirit of Pentecost is alive and well in Topeka in, and through, Josef and others like him.

I know that this is a different twist on the Pentecost story, yet even the traditional story encourages and celebrates a certain freedom to set out on new, open and uncharted roads. So such a twist on Pentecost would be worth naming and celebrating; on any day.

So, how is the Spirit of God moving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? (*chime from time to time...*) Is it in the songs that you sing...is it in the days when you serve the hungry at Matt Talbott...or when you participate in the Backpack program at Huntington? Is it in planning or attending the Peacemaking Workshop, or when you go on a mission trip? Is it in regular attendance at worship, and/or being part of the lay leadership of this church? Or can it be as simple as saying to even one other person “God hates no one”?

God lives and moves and has God’s being among us as we continue to serve and live out of our passion. Our God does not need to be served in exactly the same way that God has always been served—God comes to us in a new way in this time and place; may we continue to listen to the new...and explore the way that God calls us. Thanks be to God! Amen.