

Sermon: It's 9 O'clock Somewhere

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Scripture: Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17

As a 40 year old, I know I am lucky to still have two living grandparents. My grandfather, who I call Pop-pop, has been ailing from various infirmities over the last few years and, as many people eventually do, they have made the decision to move into a retirement community. That decision has come with an all-hands on deck family effort to help them get their home ready to sell, so Donna and the kids and I spent a full day down in Berryville, Virginia recently, helping with that effort.

I knew going to their house that this was likely to be the last day I got to spend at their rancher on their sprawling acreage of land with gorgeous trees and big skies. As we sorted through some of the things in my grandmother's craftroom, memories flooded back from the weeks I spent there over the summers with my grandparents, fishing with Pop-pop, crafting with Grandma, and riding in their antique Model A around town. When I learned how to drive, my courageous and bold grandmother put her life into my hands many times as she let me drive her car on errands, the movies, and on trips to the bookstore. When we did this, she would humor me by letting me put my music on in the car.

One summer, I remember being really excited to tell her all about this new song by Duncan Sheik called, "Barely Breathing." I put it on the radio waiting for her to fall in love with it as I had. When the song was over, she simply said, "I could barely understand a word he was saying." Cue heartbreak. I was incredulous because I understood just about every word of it. And, I mean, I hadn't played my 2Pac or Jay-Z albums (yes, this girl had both!). This was a pop ballad by a man with a really pleasant voice. I was so sure she would enjoy the song, and was so sad when she didn't. But, I suppose, when you can't make out the words to something, it can be hard to enjoy or understand.

In the intervening years, I've reflected on that moment frequently as I looked up the lyrics to a great many songs to find that, too, didn't understand a word of what many of these artists were singing! I was either singing them all wrong or I had completely misunderstood the lyrics. Sometimes it was to the point that the song was referencing things I realize now I was absolutely not old enough to be singing along to when I was in high school. This is true of music in every age, even hymns. I think about my first time listening to the *Hamilton* musical soundtrack and not having a clue as to what in the world Daveed Diggs was singing.

This same occasional incomprehensibility of the musical tongue came to mind as I meditated on our scriptures for Pentecost, especially the early section of Acts two in which the drama of Pentecost begins. Our reading today finds the disciples gathered in, according to the text: "one place." Now, I have always envisioned this as the Upper Room and I know I've heard more than a few sermons that say this very thing, but the fact is, this could just as easily have been a temple court or a person's home, as it could be any upper room anywhere.

As they sit in this one place, to their astonishment, "a sound like a rush of violent wind" sweeps through, filling "the entire house where they were sitting." As this whooshing wind swirls in their midst, divided fiery tongues appear suddenly among them – one resting on each one of them. At that very moment, all of them are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other languages that are not their own.

Because there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem at the time, the languages were so diverse that the gathered crowd was shocked to hear their own language reflected back to them. They're shocked, of course, because these Galilean disciples of the man called Jesus of Nazareth wouldn't know these various tongues. And then we get a litany of regions from which

these languages come—and thank you, Robert, for reading those out so that I don't have to. Folks, I am a notorious mispronouncer. Every year, I refresh my memory when I encounter these same names and places, and every year, I mess them up. Proper pronunciation is not my spiritual gift. Paul said the Lord gives gifts to each of us differently, so I know I have other gifts and that's okay.

But I digress, all of these Galileans, in the native tongue of other people whose language they could not possibly know, were talking about God's powerful works. They were speaking the languages of regions that in the present day make up Iran, Kuwait, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Greece, and Rome. This is a diverse region and this has the crowd understandably shocked and perplexed—if we think sometimes we have a hard time understanding song lyrics, imagine the wild experience of hearing a big group of people all speaking different languages at the same time while violent, rushing winds and tongues of fire appear in their midst. So bewildered (and that's the word used in the translation I read today: bewildered) are they by this occurrence that, when asked what on earth and under heaven is happening here, they sneer in their judgmental tone: "They are filled with new wine." In other words—so bizarre is this occurrence that the only reasonable explanation for their behavior is that they are drunk. You've heard of the song, "It's 5 O'Clock Somewhere?" Well, they think the disciples have taken that note to heart.

And then Peter. Oh, Peter. Peter, that rash, sometimes irritable, occasionally impulsive, disciple we all know and love. Peter must get a word in. He stands up and says, "these folks you're sitting over here judging? They are not drunk. It's 9 o'clock in the morning, ya'll! Come on." And then he pulls out the scriptures—goes directly to the prophets and says, these people are filled with the Spirit of God. That's what's happening here. They're not drunk. They haven't lost their minds. No. These are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now, the prophet Joel has some very specific things he believes the Spirit of God will do, but if we turn to our lectionary readings today, Jesus goes a few steps further. The lectionary takes us all the way back to John 14 as Jesus comforts his disciples before he is arrested. This text is fitting for Pentecost Sunday because it reminds us of how Jesus responds as Philip's request to see God. He tells him that he's already seen God the Creator, because God is in him and that he is doing God's work. And then... he offers them the promise that the Spirit of God will come to abide in them and will help them keep his commandments, to teach them everything, and to remind them of all that *he* has said to them all this time he has been with them.

So here, in this one place where they are all gathered, 50 days after his resurrection and 10 days after Jesus has ascended to be with the Father, is when the Holy Spirit descends upon them and, once again, changes everything. In our most challenging moments, sometimes it's hard to find God's presence. We look for God much like the disciples do as they look into the sky after Jesus has ascended. We see the horrors of mass shootings and other violence perpetrated by and against the beloved of God and we ask, "where is God in all this?" But if we are looking for God to descend from the sky and fix all our problems, we're looking in the wrong place. Just as the angels remind the disciples that Jesus isn't in the sky ready to return imminently and do all the work for them, so we must remember that our thoughts and prayers alone will not fix our problems. Jesus ascended and left the work of bringing about the Kingdom of God on the people. We know that, though Jesus has ascended, God has not abandoned them and God has not abandoned us.

The Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples with a spectacular show of power to illustrate to the disciples the manifold and complex ways in which God is still at work among them. And that same Spirit abides in us today. That spirit calls us into the work of changing the world. It doesn't do the work for us. We always

imagine the Spirit as a dove, and that's a good way to think of the Holy Spirit, but it doesn't always come so gently. Here, it comes upon them not with the subtlety of a delicate winged animal of the sky, but with whooshing winds and tongues of fire. It comes upon them in a way that is so dramatic and climactic that the bystanders think, surely, they **MUST** be drunk—at 9 o'clock in the morning. It comes upon them in an unmistakable way to remind them of the power of the God we worship and follow. And when the drama of that moment has passed, they are reminded of their call to follow in the footsteps of the risen Christ. To remember what he taught them. To go out into the world as they never had before and to literally be the hands and feet of Jesus in a world that needs him more than ever—and they set about that task with great haste, ministering to folks and changing lives right there, in that one place.

As we look to the future of our church and to our mission to love one another and make disciples who will do the very same, we must move forward not as if the Spirit has passed us by like a dove might, but as if the Spirit has *just* come upon us as it did at 9 in the morning in that “one place” all those years ago. We must live, not waiting until an opportune time to act, but as though it's always 9 O'clock somewhere because the work of the Body of Christ doesn't end when we leave that beautiful building down the street or when we are no longer gathered together as Christians in a space of worship. The disciples knew they were on a mission from Christ and they acted accordingly. Sometimes, as we sit in our buildings, we forget that the early church wasn't spending all its time sitting in the same place, they were out in the streets working to change lives in all the ways they saw Christ do the very same. They didn't care if they got the lyrics wrong or if people thought they were drunk or out of their minds, they just set out doing what it was they were called by God to do. They knew the message of the gospel was too important to be kept between them, that the lifesaving work they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to do *must be done*. Not tomorrow. Not next week.

Not next year. Now. To paraphrase rabbinic sage Hillel the Elder, “If not us, who? If not now, when?”

What are we waiting for? Let us live out our mission as the church, powered by the Holy Spirit, so that people look at us and see more than a social club. Let them look at us and see a church who isn't waiting for God to act, but who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to DO SOMETHING. To change lives. Let us be a missional church living into the call of the Triune God, reminded every day, “It's Nine O'Clock Somewhere.” Amen.