



"IT ONLY TAKES A SPARK"

SCRIPTURE: ACTS 2: 1-21

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, May 28, 2023, Pentecost, Online Only

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Acts 2: 1-21

2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2:2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 2:3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 2:4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 2:5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 2:6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 2:7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 2:8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 2:9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 2:10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 2:11 Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 2:12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 2:13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 2:14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 2:15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 2:16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 2:17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 2:18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 2:19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 2:20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 2:21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

A signature move of the Holy Spirit is the unexpected.

And my hunch is that it is not because the Holy Spirit enjoys messing with us.

The longer I live this life of faith, the more I feel in my bones how well the Spirit knows us—how ready the Spirit is to show up when we are disoriented, when life has our full attention because things are not going according to plan.

The Spirit knows that there is a malleability in us when we are caught off guard—there can be openings in the unexpected for trying new things, for improvisation, and for realizing things about ourselves we didn't already know.

You can probably think of a lot of instances, GCPC, in your own life, when the unexpected happened and life was never the same after that. I can think of many in my life—and I realize every day how unexpected so much of life is. I could have never predicted or imagined so many of the ways Spirit is at work in my life these days.

Of course, we can think of one huge collective example in terms of the unexpected, right? And today's worship service takes us all right back to those early days of COVID.

COVID— When we could barely believe what he had become. Everything changed—how we went about our days, how we dressed, how we ate, how we interacted—everything about church changed. And we had to adapt—huge, monumental adaptations in real time—sometimes picking up the pieces or figuring out a new path as worship was happening.

We literally had to learn a new language—new ways of connecting with each other. Can you remember a time in your life when you didn't even know what a YouTube chat was?!

I remember how much we all pulled together. How heartbroken and inspired I felt all at the same time.

So many of you gave yourselves to these new languages—even when you were having trouble figuring it out. I remember spending hours on the phone and online supporting so many of you as you figured out Zoom and YouTube, Realm and sharing GCPCatHome pictures.

So much of our energy as a staff was spent on finding ways to connect, when all the ways we used to connect were not allowed or not possible.

I did a graveside homily over the phone because no more than 5 people could gather outside. We did funerals on YouTube. We sang together with earbuds in and our phones on record. We planted the garden in shifts of two people at a time in two hour shifts distanced with masks.

The Holy Spirit showed up for us, Grace Covenant—and there were people who thought we were crazy for doing things like live Sunday morning worship services instead of pre-recorded worship, like planting a huge garden two people at a time, like having a funeral online, like figuring out how to create an anthem one voice at a time, like using the YouTube chat to build community with people we had never met before.

So today is not what we had planned for Pentecost 2023! We had planned on being in our sanctuary in a way we had never been in our sanctuary before—whether you were going to be in person or online—our new sanctuary renovation is going to change the ways we experience worship together.

So we had done our best to curate this year's Pentecost disorientation. But things didn't go as planned and we can't be in that space yet—the floor is not ready for all of us.

And the Spirit is showing up once again in the twists and turns that we didn't anticipate. Today is a chance for us to feel Pentecost, not just think about it.

The Spirit is not simply an interesting theological concept. The Spirit is the power of Divine Love to transform us in ways we couldn't accomplish on our own.

The Spirit breathes and moves in bodily sensations—that pit in your stomach, that electrical current of adrenaline, that intuition to respond without knowing how, the ways courage bubbles up when we have to try something new, the deep peace that passes understanding that allows us to trust God when things are unraveling all around us.

Our ancestors in the faith had no idea what to expect when Jesus told them the Holy Spirit would equip them to do ministry after his death. Our ancestors in the faith could have never anticipated the capacity to speak in languages they did not know.

Our ancestors in the faith also may have been surprised and saddened when some in their community accused them of being drunk at 9am in the morning that day in Jerusalem. It is a sadness when discord comes from something so beautiful.

It must have been a beautiful and ethereal sound to hear the rhythms and vibrations of all those languages being spoken—the melodies and harmonies of different ways of making meaning and connecting—imagine the beauty of simultaneous translation of God's Good News! Imagine the feeling of freedom and liberation where there were all these pathways being cleared and doorways being opened and relationships being forged.

At the same time, it makes sense that those who were skeptical were scared, were reactive, were judgmental. That's what our brains do when we are not sure what to make of an experience. Our brains can look for shortcuts.

Somehow, somehow, the Spirit shows up there, too, in that skepticism. Their resistance is how they are participating in the experience—and those impulses to distance, to defend—they have important stories to tell about where the hurt

is in the community, where the wounds are that have become so imbedded and maybe even infected. When we can notice the places of resistance and reactivity and see what they have to teach us, Spirit can do amazing things! The problem comes when that reactivity sparks something toxic, something that is destructive and harmful.

It only takes a spark to create a fire that can warm us all up and bring us together. And it only takes a spark to create a fire that can do a lot of damage and create a lot of harm. There is a dangerous quality to the ways these sparks grow.

And the Holy Spirit shows up in all of it–no matter what, there are healing opportunities in the embers and in the ashes.

One of the most generous invitations the Spirit gives us is that we make room for the belief that in God nothing is lost.

This is a very different sentiment than saying God is willing destruction or suffering in our lives to teach us a lesson. The Holy Spirit shows us that Divine Love is always tending the fire, creating the conditions for redemption to be possible from the transformation, from the refiner's fire.

There were many in Jerusalem that day because it was one of the main pilgrimage festivals of the Jewish calendar–the Feast of Weeks, Shavuot, celebrated 50 days after Passover and celebrated after 49 days have passed since the presentation of the first sheaf of the barley harvest. There was also a shift at some point when Pentecost became a time to remember the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai when one sound of giving the law became 7 voices and then 70 voices.

That Pentecost in Jerusalem there were many Jews from all over the place because of the festival of Pentecost.

There were disciples and Jesus followers there, too. Not all of them Jews. And the mighty wind and sound and tongues of fire—those things carried this group of people still reeling from the execution of their beloved leader and the power vacuum that they were in during these embryonic moments of a new movement.

They did not yet have their footing in who they were and what they were supposed to do.

The Spirit came into that place of disorientation, grief, expectation, and unknown and gave them the capacity to speak in ways they did not know, to connect with people who they had never been able to connect with, to share the proclamation of God's love being for EVERYONE, not just a select few, in ways that all people could understand according to their context and experience.

That day, all those centuries ago—a movement to heal the human family gained momentum, and took hold in the hearts of the broken hearted and the fool hearted and the hard hearted and the soft hearted.

That day, all those lifetimes ago, people gave themselves to something they had not imagined was possible—or known how to participate in or even believed was a good idea.

So this Pentecost, Grace Covenant, what will the spark ignite in us? Can we come together and trust what the Spirit is doing in our midst these days. The power of it all is palpable and beautiful, and at turns terrifying and bewildering.

The Holy Spirit can use even a sanctuary renovation project being delayed to show us again what we're made of and who we can be when we trust the new ways we are learning to move in the world.

The Spirit teaches us again and again that the power of Jesus's message to be cross cultural is the opposite of colonization.

Colonization is forced and enforced conformity. The Spirit is not about enforced conformity, but the Spirit is about empowering flexibility, innovation, and transformation. The Spirit's trademark is expansiveness, room, accessibility.

And maybe this visceral reminder of the flexibility we learned we have in the COVID days is just what we need to fully embrace the gift of our new sanctuary space.

Jesus' church thrives in variety, openness, in Holy shifts. Jesus' church is not a closed system. So, we cannot succumb to the temptation to strive for sameness.

We are doing hard things so we should feel some disorientation and confusion. That's when we know the Spirit is really showing up for us in a big way.

The Holy Spirit is the reason change is a gift in the life of faith—because change is when the Spirit's gifts are the most potent and promising.

The more we lean into the warmth of that promise, the more we can be ignited by the potent possibilities of what can be fueled by this fire, by this fire in our bellies for a better world.

It only takes a spark to get the fire going—but it takes a community to tend that fire so that it feeds the life and love the Spirit has given us to tend.

Happy Pentecost, Grace Covenant! Here's to a Spirit-filled summer. Expect the unexpected and be ready for the Spirit to tune our ears to the beautiful sounds of a community coming into its God-given purpose.

(RRC and AKKP come on screen for Communion)

So, let us begin here, at the Table that Jesus sets for us—a Table not bound to one location, one culture, one language, or one right way.

This is a Table of radical welcome, a table of simultaneous translation, a table to fuel movements of liberation, a table that teaches us the sensations of abundance, of enough to go around, of come as you are, of the truth shall set you free.

This is a table that the Spirit breathes life into every time we gather in Christ's name. The Spirit has the power to take something so ordinary and turn it to extraordinary purpose—to take a disparate, scattered, and even weary people and equip us to be Christ's Body loose in the world.

The feast is ready and there is a place for you and for me.

Thanks be to God.