

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House
Pentecost Sunday, June 12, 2011

Sermon Notes: Where are you?
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Along with being faithful, inspired, and holy, I am sure, these evangelists – especially Luke and John, would make great set designers. Steven Spielberg has nothing on them! And, were they ever right for their times. I'm only sorry we don't have the video!

In the times these folks were writing narrative was the primary form of communications for most, word of mouth, fantastic stories, with a limited broad understanding of sciences, dark and foreboding nights illumined by the stars and heavenly bodies, candles – maybe – when they could be afforded; outdoor fires to keep warm or safe, darkness feared, Romans feared, oppression, poverty, death, illness – a mortality rate for infants of 30 – 40% and a general life-expectancy in the 50's. Scary, mysterious, constantly living in fear of earthquakes, eclipses, supernovae, storms, drought, pestilence – and for many in one way or another, none of this seen as natural or even political occurrences, but as indications of God's displeasure, anger, wrath – punishment and reward.

Think Charleston Hesston.

For the Hebrews, the Jews, this was a running story of thousands of years. The Torah or Old Testament is about everything God. God was an active director and participant directly or indirectly in everything.

From Adam and Eve to Methuselah to Noah to Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, Moses, Boaz and Ruth and Naomi, Saul, David, Solomon (and his 700 wives and 300 concubines)...it was all about God.

Stories about people and God, lives lived in anticipation of degrees of faithfulness to God – for better or worse; surrounded by wars, invasions, fighting, prophets, kings, other gods, religions, idols, and constantly judged and tested by the Law, the traditions, and proscribed measures of faithfulness.

And Luke, as we noted last week, is speaking to Jews from within and without contradiction to the long history they know and understand. Unlike some others, he does not see Jesus as a fork in the road from Judaism, rather as a continuation. And he frames and designs his sets and his narratives to convince others that Jesus is the Messiah – this is his stated purpose, that forgiveness and life everlasting is available to all who call on Jesus, that Jesus will return that the promises of the covenant of God and Moses and Israel will be kept, and that the end times are not at hand, but that the kingdom of God is here and it is our mission to carry the news and wonders of Jesus and all he had done and continues to do to the ends of the earth.

Luke saw no conflict and this Greek was on fire and his goals clear: to ignite others in this Good News, this wondrous gospel, this living possibility available to all for an understanding of their nature, their God-given nature to be children of God – Father/Mother to them all through the witness and death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit....Luke is a wind in himself!

And he brings the story Pentecost in the setting of those gathered together on the day of the Jewish celebration of Shavuot, the Jewish harvest festival which commemorates God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai fifty days after the Exodus.

Biblically, within the tradition of the faithful Jewish community, and using the ancient prophet Joel to further support his witness to the promise of Jesus the Messiah and the prophecy that proclaimed him – the miracle of languages takes place. Xenolalia or xenoglossy – the ability to suddenly speak in a foreign language that you never studied or knew – is different from glossalalia, the speaking in tongues to reveal or express a spiritual outburst in a language all its own – has taken over the disciples and awed the crowd. A ball of confusion.

The Spirit has entered the scene and turned everything upside down – actually, one might say right-side up! He's careful, though, how he describes this – like any good writer.

Luke does not describe the Spirit as the wind or even as the fire. He carefully states that a sound: “like a strong wind, a gale force was suddenly heard,” and “Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.”

It must have been quite a day. And when some so confused by all this commotion and upset were at a loss to explain any of it – they charged that those speaking in the foreign languages were drunk.

Ahh, the stage is set now for the monologue! Luke describes Peter as taking stepping up and into the midst of all that has been described and in high oratorical passionate fashion pronounces the message, preaching his words – in powerful and dramatic ways – the rising action to the climax! So much so that thousands come to believe on that day and the mission of the church is off and running like never before!

Not only can Luke design a set and write the narrative – he can cast the parts like no other!

But more than a scene, sequel, or feature length movie of its own, Luke's narrative continues the story of *God* in the lives of those God has created. God, in fact, had so filled the room and the disciples with such Spirit that the story had to be told – and it was – and powerfully so. There was no choice, no resistance, so much so that even they did things they knew not how they did. It is all about God and Jesus and Spirit – make no mistake. This is an evangelist I might just have watched on Sunday mornings on TV, although I would much rather be there in person.

There is no science today that fills in the gap for what occurred in Luke's narrative, no science or theory or explanation that wasn't available to them at that time – that is available to us now.

However, *there has been* a lot of knowledge, scientific and otherwise accumulated and recorded in the years since -- and so, rather than simply accept the power of God in our days, as they did in theirs; instead of seeing the potential and reality of miracles occurring on a regular basis; the change of heart and new spirit that moves others to proclaim the mystery of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (or by whatever other names you know God) –

instead of embracing this: we start out as skeptical and dismissive and attribute outcomes through the filter of the great knowledge and skills we now possess, along with the science upon which we have unraveled the many mysteries – those left, soon to fall.

In other words, we often center our understanding- around us, not God; around our knowledge, our experience, our explanations, and our ability to find the answers...our arrogance and hubris and fear – for it is fear of letting go into God that fuels such things.

Still, often in spite of ourselves and our own carefully constructed barriers there are times when we are touched, stopped in our tracks and, in fact, filled with fire and wind and breath – things that happen that cannot be explained or contained and need to be spoken and often motivate us to action...if we are so open to such upheaval.

At Christmas time, here in this sanctuary, Christian and Monica filled this space with a performance of Amahl and the Night Visitor. As the show progressed and the wise men completed their stay and moved on following the forgiveness and conversion of Amahl's mother for attempting to steal some of the gifts meant for the Baby Jesus – gifts Amahl's mother wanted to use for her own son – at that moment I was totally caught up, lifted inside in a way that I cannot describe, other than to say that I appreciated anew the narrative and the stories – and the way they spoke to something other, stories, which I admit I too often referred to as myth-like, not accurate, and the cause of so much confusion, pain, hypocrisy, contradiction and more in religion.

Somewhere in the performance the fire began to burn, some wind was in the room, some witness and expression placed into motion that I retell the story today, seven months later, touched and moved into the action of witness, hoping you will remember times when such happened to you, so that today in the midst of all that goes on – you, too, can remember how loved and embraced and part of the story you, me – we are.

Yes, I still think that we get too caught up in literal translations – and that it is a big problem and obstacle to knowing God; yes, I still think we want to argue too scientifically the things we can not explain; yes, I still think religions too often feed this confusion through misrepresentation and fear of changing for reasons I that often sadden me.

And yes, I think we can do more to overcome the obstacles, more to let God in in ways that fill us – set us on fire, move us away from biblical sound bites to the real meaning of God in our lives and be “withness” – in witness to one another and with one another in the marvelous and strengthening and mysterious things God does in our lives – revealing to one another how we are touched by God. Religion and spirituality has become too much of a personal “possession.” We mistake the burning desire inside for something private, to be held tightly and closely – rather than as a gift to be shared. We walk around believing one thing and saying and doing another. It is all mixed up. So much so that we sometimes see others as “drunk” in some way, rather than as prophets.

Last week our Homeless Outreach Program presented a show in collaboration with Theater of the Oppressed called HELLter Shelter about the corruption and problems extant in the shelter system in New York City. It was a fine effort by many with an important message. Everyone who was involved is to be congratulated.

Still, I couldn’t help but think that yes, there are problems in the system, but there are also people who work hard and long, professionals who care deeply for others, and programs helping many who we would never know others were helped by – unless we raised them up, too. As I sat there the fire began to burn in me, not just for the injustice – surely for that, but also to be the voice of the so many who really try to help, for agencies and other churches and places like this that every day follow their heart and their calling – the spirit – to help others make their lives better, find their way to wholeness, and yes – for many a spiritual awakening and renewal. Often at great cost and personal and institutional sacrifice.

It is easy to tear down, criticize, demand scientific explanations, proof, and more. We live in a world that so often is filled with brokenness and danger that we retreat into a state of defensiveness, protection, secrecy, and a privacy that stifles that which needs wind and fire to grow.

Pentecost, Shavuot – Jew, Christian, Muslim – all faith and traditions, put the fear down, let go of the need to explain and defend, open arms and hearts to the arms and hearts of others: let passion and breath burn and disperse the enmity so that our faces can be burnished and glowing as the face of Moses, when he stepped into the presence of God filled with the Spirit and the call to bring this word to the ends of the earth – that the kingdom of God is here.

The stage was set long ago. The cast awaits us to join them – for this is truly the show that travels to the ends of the earth, the “peace train” that is waiting for us all to board.