

Investigating an In-Spired Incident
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Acts 2:1-17

My first profession, as some of you know, was journalism. I will always be thankful for its lessons in how to think, communicate, observe and question the world around us.

Anyone who has taken even a high-school class in journalism knows the five key questions that are the basic tools for any cub reporter: Who? What? When? Where? And Why? There is a lot more to journalism, of course, but answers to those questions can inform even the most basic news story.

Today we are given an incident in Acts that was life-giving for the church and can be life-changing for those who seek to know God. Today is Pentecost Sunday, when we recall how our God made good on a promise. Last Sunday, we considered the ascension, when the risen Christ finally ascended into heaven. Before, however, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit as an advocate and a guide to all who minister in his name.

In Acts, we hear the account of the Spirit's arrival, a chaotic scene if there ever was one. This incident invites our investigation into just what happened that day and what it means. So I invite you to take out your reporter's notebook and pencil. Let us try to get to the bottom of this incident by asking – who, what, when, where and why?

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Let's start with "where" which is a fairly easy answer – the place is Jerusalem. It is the very heart of life, culture and faith for the nation of Israel.

As for the "when," the story takes place in the first century of the Common Era. But there is more to "when" than just the chronological date and that gets us to the "who" of our investigation.

For Jews in Jerusalem, it was during one of ancient Judaism's three great festivals. The festival of Shavout was a joyous celebration in which the first fruits of the harvest were given to God to celebrate the gift of the Law, the Torah. These laws framed all of Judaism's life and customs.

But there was still another group in the “who” of our story. There were those who had put their faith not in the Torah but in a New Covenant, promised by Jesus Christ. Five weeks earlier, Christ had been crucified and his devoted followers had reported sightings of Christ resurrected. Only one week earlier, Christ had ascended but not before he promised the gift of a messenger, the Holy Spirit.

In a sense, then, the contrast between these groups was sharp. Thousands of Jews had gathered to celebrate the gift of the Law, the Torah. For them it was a great and joyous festival of abundance.

However, for those first Christians, about 120 according to scripture, it was a time of profound uncertainty, wonder at the talk of resurrection mixed with the fear that came with following one whom the powers that be considered a troublemaker. These believers were huddled in seclusion, perhaps still shell shocked from Jesus’ crucifixion, stunned by sight of the risen Jesus and now confused after watching their Lord ascend into the heavens.

So all of that gives us the “where,” the “when” and the “who” of this incident and takes us to the “what,” as in “Just what happened?”

This part of this story may be the most familiar to us. Scripture says that a sound like the rush of the wind swept into the house and enabled the gathering there to speak in different languages, proclaiming the power of God. This attracted a crowd from outside the house, a diverse group because of the range of people in Jerusalem. Though members of the crowd were from many nations and regions, they all understood the proclamation of the Lord in their own native language. With the sweep of the Holy Spirit, the good news rushed through the crowd, uniting it across its diversity into one community, receiving one message.

Now, fantastic stories like this lend themselves to a range of interpretations, which is also part of the “what” of investigating scripture. Even then, onlookers offered different interpretations. Some assumed the only explanation to the crazy events was that all those involved were drunk. This was an easy way to explain -- and dismiss -- the otherwise inexplicable incident. Yes, they had just been in the wine a bit too early in the day. Others, however, attributed the event to the power of God, an utterly unpredictable God who is always exceeding our rational explanations.

Then Peter, one of the twelve, stood. He reminded those present of what the prophet Joel had foretold, a prophecy now fulfilled, just as Jesus had more recently promised, just days before. As Peter said:

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they will prophesy.”

Now, when it comes to journalism, sometimes it's critical to know when to leave the scene and go file your story. Leave too early and you might miss something very important. Many who retell the story of Pentecost leave the story there. But I suggest we stick around to see what happens next.

What happens next is that church breaks out. Peter keeps preaching and he delivers a whopper. Members of the crowd, which had grown considerably by then, asked what they should do.

“Repent and be baptized,” says Peter, turn away from whatever keeps you from life with God and be sealed to God through this thing that has come, this Holy Spirit. Bam! 3,000 people were baptized on the spot, scripture says.

But that wasn't all. As the words on the front of your bulletin tell us, “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” A few verses later, scripture says that the new community “had all things in common” and demonstrated glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

So we see why it is described as the birth of the church. Even on the day of the Spirit's arrival we see the broad outlines of what the churches have done in various ways ever since. Teaching and fellowship, and, in worship, preaching, breaking of bread and prayer. Thankfully some years later, someone thought we should also sing. And God made the choir. Thanks be to God.

So all of that leaves us with one last question, the “why” question?

Whatever happened that day, whether this story is a metaphor or allegory, literal account or some other version of “truth,” why did it happen? What we do know is that the Holy Spirit is real. So, why did God see fit to be embodied not just as the parent and the Christ but also God in a third form, a spiritual one? Why was this third substance of divine expression needed to complete our understanding of our creator, redeemer and sustainer?

Christ gave his apostles that answer before the ascension. The mission of the church at that point – and from then on – has been to witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed, in talk and action. The Holy Spirit, then, equips us to do just that.

It happened for the disciples that day and it still happens among us. The Holy Spirit created a bond among them that would seal them together, wherever they were, and embolden them to go out into the world and witness to Jesus Christ. The same goes for us and today, in the Spirit, we have extended that bond to yet one more member of our community, Grace Jordan.

The spiritual author Henri Nouwen writes:

“This is the real Pentecost experience. When the Spirit descended on the disciples huddling together in fear, they were set free to move out of their closed room into the world (W)hen they received the Spirit, they became a body of free people who could stay in communion with each other When it is the Spirit of God and not fear that unites us in community, no distance of time or place can separate us.”¹

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I want to wrap up by highlighting one specific aspect of life with God that is increased through the gift of the Spirit ... and that is prayer. After all, what were the first things the newly baptized did once the Holy Spirit came?

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread ... and to prayer.”

There are, of course, many ways to pray. However we pray our God not only hears us but dwells with us while we are praying. The Spirit meets us there, whatever we are experiencing, whatever we are praying. It is not automatic, of course, we must open ourselves to the presence of the Spirit to feel it fully.

Today we are reminded of the power of prayer as we welcome Tom Bohr back to worship for the first time since his cardiac arrest. If you want to know what it is like to be surrounded in prayer, ask his wife, Kitty. She can tell you stories about feeling palpably held by your prayers throughout those first few nights when Tom’s fate wasn’t at all clear.

¹ The Only Necessary Thing, p. 132-133

I suppose another reason that prayer is on my mind on this Pentecost Sunday is that it is such a vital element of our ongoing 3D process of discernment, discussion and dreaming. Early reports from some of your small group discussions are exciting, including some accounts in the Caldwell newsletter available today. Ideas are popping like popcorn. What a blessing that so many of you are engaged and contributing.

But, this venture cannot succeed without prayer. That, in fact, is what differentiates the 3D process from the kind of strategic planning any other organization might undertake. What we are seeking is not our dreams for the next phase of Caldwell's life or the world's. It is God's plan we seek to locate amid our gatherings and ideas. It is God's calling. It is God's challenge that we seek as a community striving to be missional in the world and transformative for those we touch, including ourselves. As Henri Nouwen writes:

"Prayer is the language of the Christian community...when we sit together in silent prayer, we create a space where we sense that the One we are waiting for is already touching us...Communal and individual prayer belong together as two folded hands..."²

So, let us pray continually, as those who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us do so in all ways, that God in the Spirit will in-spire us as we dream dreams and see visions. And, let us do so knowing that God takes our prayers just as seriously – or not – as we do. As has been said:

"The desire for prayer is the desire for a meeting with truth."³

Amen.

Now I want to call on a member who is a fine model of the contemplative life with God in prayer, Peg Robarchek.

About 20 years ago, I asked a woman to help me heal my life, which had been a train wreck for, oh, about 40 years. This woman told me that healing was a spiritual task and gave me my first assignment: to pray every morning.

Now you have to understand, at that point I did not have a relationship with God—I wasn't sure there was a God, but I was pretty sure that if there was a God, I didn't like

² Ibid, p. 126

³ "Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer" by Ann & Barry Ulanov:

the way he ran things and I really didn't want a relationship with God. So praying was the last thing I wanted to do. But my bag of tricks was already empty. So I told this woman I would pray.

When I woke up the next morning, my first thought was that I could **not** pray and just **say** I did. Which tells you a lot about how much my life needed healing.

Fortunately, I was given a moment of grace—I guess that means prayer can work under certain circumstances even if all you're doing is thinking about how to get out of praying. In that moment of grace I recognized that unless I did something different, nothing would change. So I prayed. I prayed that morning and the next morning and the next. It became what I did, like brushing my teeth. I prayed. Without believing in it, without wanting to do it, without having any idea whatsoever who I was praying to or that anything positive could come out of it. I prayed.

And my life healed. Not always in the ways I would have chosen. Sometimes my life still feels like a train wreck, on a given day. But it has healed; there's no doubt about that.

My spiritual journey has not been a straight line. And I still have a lot of questions. But the one thing I no longer question is that, in ways that are still a mystery to me, prayer works.

That's why I am so excited that Caldwell has decided to open the Prayer Room every Wednesday afternoon from 3:45 to 6:45. I'm excited to have this place to immerse myself in the spiritual discipline that keeps me grounded and sane and aware of God's fingerprints all over my life.

So I will be there every Wednesday. I hope some of you—a lot of you—will join me as often as you can. Especially if prayer is something you feel uncertain about. Especially if prayer is something that makes you uncomfortable. Especially if you aren't really sure how relevant prayer is in this crazy, complicated world. Especially if you are, as I was, a reluctant pray-er.

You'll find an article about the Prayer Room in the issue of Caldwell Good News that's available today. You'll find an information sheet in the Prayer Room. And you can ask me questions. I also invite you to bring me your ideas for making this a powerful place for building a stronger connection with God and deepening the prayer experience here.

And now, in case I haven't already proven by singing with the choir today that I am willing to step outside my comfort zone, let me ask for you to join me in prayer.

Holy One, thank you for filling this place with your spirit today. Thank you for providing us with a place where we can rest in your spirit every Wednesday afternoon. We know

we don't need a special place, special words, a special time, to connect with you. But sometimes we do need those things to strengthen our commitment and our discipline. Sometimes we just need to be in each other's presence so we can remember that we are always in your presence. So we thank you for the abundance with which you provide everything we need to dwell in you as you dwell in us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.