

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: May 28, 2023 Year A, Pentecost Sunday

Text: Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23

Title: What Would You Do . . . ?

Focus: What can we do together when we see the power of God's Holy Spirit working in us? How will the Spirit enable us to "see visions and dream dreams" to see the world as God intends and courageously work towards that?

John 20:19-23

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, **he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."** ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Acts 2:1-21

²When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 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. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven

above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Quiz Questions Get Discussion Going

Are you ready for a little congregation/audience participation? Let's try some Quiz Questions. How about Quiz Questions about the state of Nevada?

- What's the state flower?
 - Sagebrush
- What's the state bird?
 - Mountain Bluebird
- State animal?
 - Desert Bighorn Sheep
- The state nickname?
 - The Silver State

Sometimes when I'm leading a group, I pose Quiz Questions like these to people. When we had a few minutes at the Family Communion Workshop as people began to arrive I began to spontaneously ask State of Nevada Quiz Questions.

Other times, I design the questions ahead of time, like when I'm leading a particular class. I have been an instructor for APA, which is the Administrative Personnel Association, at their conferences for church administrators for continuing education and professional development. Here are some church-related Quiz Questions I asked them. Compared to the fact-oriented questions about Nevada, they're more of a "What do you think?" kind of question which functions as a discussion starter.

APA Quiz Questions

- Say 1 good thing about your church.
- What are three key qualities or characteristics that make for a successful relationship with your pastor /supervisor or with other church staff?
- What's one tip you would give to a person just starting out as a church support staff employee?
- If you had \$1000 and 5 eager participants in your setting, what mission project would you start?

(We'll get back to these Quiz Questions later.)

The Mission of the Church and the Power of the Holy Spirit

The reading from John, which we also heard the second Sunday of Easter, is set on Easter Sunday, the Day of Resurrection. The disciples are afraid; they have shut the doors and locked themselves in. Jesus suddenly appears, offering them peace, breathing life into them, and blessing them with the Holy Spirit.

In the reading from Acts, the believers are all gathered in one place. God's Spirit is poured out and people are baffled by what they see happening among them. Peter stands up to describe how ordinary people—"all flesh," he says--can do extraordinary things—like prophesy and see visions and dream dreams--when God's Spirit is unleashed among them.

- The quiz question "If you had \$1000 and 5 eager participants in your setting, what mission project would you start?" is a good one because it gets us thinking about what God can do in our midst.
- The connection of the quiz question to the setting of the two texts is something like, **If you knew for certain the Holy Spirit would fill you with all the ability you'd need, what would you do?**

These two texts respond to that question in the way that they describe the interaction between the people in the stories and the activity of God's Spirit.

The Disciples Stuck in their Fear were Commissioned by Jesus (John)

In John, the disciples are hiding in the upper room out of fear that those who crucified Jesus may come after them. Jesus greets them: "Peace be with you."

And then what does Jesus do as he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them?

I think his greeting acknowledges their fear and anxiety as well the wholeness he intends for them, but he doesn't stop there. Though they are afraid, as he breathes the Holy Spirit into them, he doesn't take them away from Jerusalem or fortify the room in which they're hiding, but instead he sends them out into that dangerous world: **"As the Father sent me, so I now send you"** (20:21). He gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit to create in them the courage they will need to follow Jesus' command. He acknowledges their fear, but he promises he will be with them in the Holy Spirit and he sends them out. Apparently, the Spirit is enough; it is what they need.

The Day of Pentecost (Reflection on Acts 2)

As the believers are gathered in one place in Acts, confusing things happen:

- There is the sound of a violent, rushing wind filled the entire house.
- Tongues as of fire appeared among them.
- People from all over the region, of different cultures and languages, all spoke in their own native language, and yet they understood each other.
- These signs were confusing: people were amazed, astonished, and perplexed, and they wondered, "What does this mean?"
- Some people laughed and sneered and figured people were just drunk.

Isn't it remarkable that it is Peter—the one who had denied knowing Jesus--who stands up to interpret for them what's going on using words of Scripture from the prophet Joel.

- God's Spirit was being poured out on all God's people, young and old, men and women, slave and free.

- God's power in the Holy Spirit, God's ongoing presence among them, was transforming them to be the Church in the world.

Just 2 weeks ago, we read from John 14, in which Jesus promises the disciples on the eve of his death that though he himself will not be with them in a bodily way as he has, they will not be left "orphaned" or alone, but will have the ongoing presence of God in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is described as the Advocate, the one who walks alongside us, accompanying us.

In today's readings, we see that promise lived out. From today's passages, we get the sense that the Spirit isn't some Superhero or Wild West Gunslinger to come rescue us, but instead equips, encourages, and stays with us, helping us perceive the needs of our neighbors and community and then rise to the occasion to meet those needs with tenacity, competence, and courage.

Visions and the World in which We're Living

Peter stands up to speak and uses scripture to interpret what is happening here. From the prophet Joel he says,

¹⁷. . . your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17)

- **"Seeing visions and dreaming dreams?"**
 - What does that mean? How does the Spirit help us do that?

I think of "seeing visions and dreaming dreams" as being able to see the world as God would intend it to be. What kind of world does God wish to bring about and how can we be a part of that?

That's a description of God's *Kingdom* or *kin-dom* or the *reign of God*. That's what we pray for or what we seek when we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done." It is the ability to see the world as God would have us see it and work for that "vision" to become a reality or move one step closer to that being reality.

The World as It Presently Is

- Aren't we confronted all the time with news and events that cause us to shake our heads in lament and frustration as we're confronted how far we are from what God surely intends?

For me that happened this past week when I read about a 20-year-old Maryland man who has been walking around the townhouse complex and neighborhood where he lives with his parents while carrying an AR-15-style rifle and a loaded magazine in his pocket. His path includes walking by a school bus stop. He says he is asserting his Second Amendment right and protesting recent state gun control legislation.

Understandably, his actions have terrified kids and parents. They're rightly frightened about being caught in the next mass shooting.

But police and state officials say that his actions are legal since this particular weapon is not covered under state regulations.¹

The communications director from the nearby school district took a direct approach by calling this young man to talk with him about his protest and the impact it was having on his community. It wasn't having the effect he intended of helping people see the validity of his right to carry the weapon.

- Instead, "He has certainly evoked fear and panic. That's what happens when you walk up to people with a gun," said school Communications Director Mosier.

The two men both described their conversation as cordial, and the young man said he agreed not to take his gun for a walk when school buses are dropping off students in the neighborhood.² So, some common understanding developed.

A Counter-Cultural Vision

But don't conflict and exertion of power or demanding one's own way and extremism seem like behavior patterns that have become the norm in our wacky world?

How can we live differently? Or, to repeat the Quiz Question,

- If you had \$1000 and 5 eager participants in your setting, what mission project would you start?" Or, its variation, **If you knew for certain the Holy Spirit would fill you with all the ability you'd need, what would you do?**

If God's people, accompanied by the Holy Spirit, are going to "See visions and dream dreams" about how they shall live, then what would those visions and dreams be? And if our world seems increasingly wacky, then those dreams would be counter-cultural, in that they would present an intentionally different picture compared to the world around us.

I read about just that sort of a counter-cultural environment in the book I just finished reading: ***The Day the World Came to Town: 9/11 in Gander, Newfoundland.***³ Award-winning journalist Jim DeFede wrote the book detailing what happened on 9/11 and over the course of the following 5 days after the attacks on that day led to the order to close American air space. Planes on their way to destinations across the US had to find a place to land and 38 of them were diverted to the former military airport at the former military base in Gander, Newfoundland. The book tells the

¹ Julian Kim, "A Maryland man has been carrying an AR-15-style rifle near a school bus stop." Posted May 20, 2023 at NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/20/1177315655/a-maryland-man-has-been-carrying-an-ar-15-style-rifle-near-a-school-bus-stop>

² Rick Hutzell, "J'Den, it's time to put your AR-15-style rifle down. Do it before someone gets hurt." Posted May 19, 2023 in *The Baltimore Banner*. <https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/opinion/column/ar-15-bus-stop-maryland-HGYAF6LPVRE7HGHNEYHTBDTXCE/>

³ Jim DeFede, *The Day the World Came to Town: 9/11 in Gander, Newfoundland* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002, 2021.)

stories of countless interactions between “The Plane People,” as they came to be called, and “Newfies,” the good people from Gander, Newfoundland, and the surrounding towns.

The book was the inspiration for *Come from Away*, the Broadway musical which I know some of you saw when it came to the Pioneer Center here in Reno.

The book is not a religious book, so it’s not presented as a “God at work” kind of book, but it reflects the human capacity for goodness and selflessness and community as a marked contrast to the presence of evil and destruction in the world as represented by 9/11 and the attacks on the US that day. **In that way, it’s counter-cultural in the way we’ve described.** The people of Gander captured people’s attention because their kindness and deep-rooted goodness was in such contrast to what most people encounter in their everyday world.

The people of Gander, Newfoundland exhibited a full embracing welcome of these 38 flights filled with somewhere around 7000 people that was in such contrast to what people were accustomed to experiencing in everyday life that they had trouble believing that it was real.

Some examples of their uncommon kindness and hospitality

- People brought towels, pillows, blankets, other supplies, and homemade meals from their own homes to the shelters.
- Locals drove to the schools, churches, and service clubs that served as shelters and picked people up to take them to their homes to provide showers. The Plane People were astounded that Newfies would take in total strangers like this.
- Store managers instructed their staff to use whatever was in their inventory to provide for “The Plane People.”
- Volunteers and staff from the SPCA and a local veterinarian came each day to care for dogs and cats and even some monkeys that were on the flights, and then returning to work and home to care for their regular pets/responsibilities.
- The town authorized the use of trucks from the fire department to drive to next big town to gather toys for young children when all the toys in their town had already been given.
- One woman offered her car to a couple to drive around in and pick up supplies they needed while she was at work. She reasoned that she didn’t need it since it would just be sitting in the parking lot while she was at work. They couldn’t believe that she would trust total strangers like that.

And, of course, all these remarkable acts of kindness came in response to acts of horror, evil, and loss that passengers on the planes slowly began to grasp. They were initially confused about why they were diverted from their destinations and slowly began to understand as they were informed bit-by-bit about the unimaginable attacks on the Twin Towers, Pentagon, and the thwarted additional flight that crashed in Pennsylvania.

Recognition of that Remarkable Environment of the “Newfies”

How do you explain this uncommon kindness? Newfoundlanders for generations have been isolated on an island and powerless against the harshness of the weather. They have learned to count on each one another for survival. Their neighbor-to-neighbor orientation carried over to how they responded to “The Plane People.”⁴

“‘Newfoundlanders are a different breed of people,’ said town constable Oz Fudge. ‘A Newfoundlander likes to put his arm around a person and say ‘It’s going to be all right. I’m here. It’s going to be okay. We’re your friend. We’re your buddy. We’ve got you.’ That’s the way it’s always been. That’s the way it always will be. And that’s the way it was on September 11th” (Introduction, p. 5.)

While religious faith isn’t a focal point of the book or the common thread among the Newfie people, I found myself identifying with their common sense of mission. They were going to wholeheartedly care for these guests because it was the right thing to do and because that’s what Newfies do. That spirit was a deeply-held part of their identity as a hearty and determined people.

“The Plane People” were of course the recipients of this gracious hospitality in the most direct way, but I think the popularity of the book and the musical and the continued telling of these stories show that all of us are touched by it.

It’s counter-cultural in that that selfless hospitality is so different from what we have come to expect in our everyday interactions.

The Church is Called to be a Counter-Cultural Place

On the Day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2, what happened that day as a sign of God’s Spirit moving among them was so different, so out-of-the ordinary, so radical, that they had trouble finding words to describe it. The Church is called by the Spirit to be a Counter-Cultural Place, too.

Remember the Quiz Question?

- “If you had \$1000 and 5 eager participants in your setting, what mission project would you start?”
- **Or: If you knew for certain the Holy Spirit would fill you with all the ability you’d need, what would you venture to do?**

May we be receptive to God’s Spirit calling us to see visions and dream dreams of how God intends the world to be and may we be courageous enough to live that out.

⁴ Summarized from the author’s introduction, p. 4.