

Pentecost

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Acts 2:1-21

After Jesus ascended to heaven, his disciples – about 120 of them all together – waited in Jerusalem as Jesus had commanded them, waited to begin the mission Jesus had assigned to them, waited to receive the power Jesus had promised them. They waited for ten days.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. Something like tongues of fire appeared to them, separating and coming to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were pious Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. And at this sound, they gathered in a large crowd. And they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, “Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how do we each hear them in our own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; people from Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya around Cyrene; residents of Rome – Jews and proselytes alike – Cretans and Arabs, we hear them speaking in our own language about the marvelous deeds of God.”

They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, “What does this mean?” But others mockingly said, “They’ve had too much new wine.”

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and spoke to them, “Men of Judea and all of you staying in Jerusalem: let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you presume. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young people will see visions,
your old people will dream dreams.
Even on my male and female servants,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
I will show wonders in heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and clouds of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
will be saved.”

Sermon

High hopes often collapse into disappointment. Boston Red Sox fans have known this well over the years. The Red Sox won the World Series in 2004, but that was an atypical year. The earth must have

been leaning too far over on its axis that year, or something. The usual experience of Red Sox fans was not eclipsed or erased by what happened in 2004. That usual experience is captured in this bit of baseball haiku:

Leaves turn golden brown.

Shadows lengthen.

Red Sox begin to lose.

Yes, 2004 did happen. And bright moments have continued to occur since then. But at bottom nothing really has changed. It's the same today as it was years ago when my mother pulled for the Red Sox, and years before that when my grandfather did. The hopes of Red Sox fans are often disappointed.

Of course, disappointed hopes are not limited to baseball. In some ways, disappointed hopes form the core of the biblical story. From Adam and Eve to King Solomon, we have disappointed hopes. From the crucifixion of Jesus to his second coming that we're still waiting for, we have disappointed hopes.

After Jesus's resurrection, his disciples were expecting something big. That expectation was the product of their religious heritage as Jews. The Torah and the Prophets and the Writings, plus long reflection upon them, had generated among the Jewish people the hope of a Messiah. In the first century this hope took several different forms. But in one form or another the hope was widespread. With the hope of a Messiah there was also the hope of a Messianic Age. This hope, too, took various forms. Yet there was a common theme: in the Messianic Age, all that was wrong would at last be put right — and this adjustment of all things would begin with Israel.

Jesus tapped into these first century messianic expectations. He acted and sounded enough like a messiah to have people wondering. Those who were closest to him were ready to come right out and say it (though he told them not to). When Jesus was crucified, however, that deflated the hopes that had been rising. Nobody expected a crucified messiah. A crucified messiah made no sense.

But when Jesus rose from the dead, his disciples's hopes were reignited. Over the course of the next forty days that he spent with his disciples, the flame of their hope burned brighter and brighter. And just before Jesus ascended, the disciples stood on their tiptoes to ask him, "Now? Now? Now will you restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They were ready, ready for the Messianic Age, so ready they could taste it. But Jesus told them, "Wait." And they waited. They waited for ten more days. They waited, expecting something big.

They got something different. The world did not change all at once. Israel did not change all at once. Something smaller happened, smaller but still significant, something laden with hints and hooks into their hope, something with more to it than met the eyes. The Spirit came, causing quite a commotion. It was the Spirit of life and creation, who had brooded over the waters of creation in the beginning, who had breathed the first breath into all life. It was the Spirit of new creation, ready to transform the world. It was the Spirit who spoke a thousand languages all at once.

That day in Jerusalem, the Spirit began the work of new creation. You could hardly tell, though. Despite all the commotion, despite Peter's interpretation of things ("These are the last days; now is the time of restoration; the great and terrible day of the Lord is on the horizon"), you could hardly tell. This wasn't creation by divine fiat: "Let there be . . ." and *poof!* there it is. This new creation would be a slow process, a process of evolution. Changes wouldn't happen all at once. Little by little the kingdom would spread. Pious Jews from all over the Roman empire were in Jerusalem that day. They would take both the news and the Spirit back home with them. The Word of God would go forth in many languages, and it would not return empty. In short order much of the Roman world would know about Jesus, though they would be slow to embrace him.

It would be a slow process over all, and without universal effect. It would not look at all like the expected Messianic Age. No wonder few Jews would welcome Jesus as their messiah. How can there be

a messiah without all things being put right in a Messianic Age? The “last days,” as Peter labeled them, would be painfully slow to unfold. Along the way, many a high hope would be disappointed.

I suppose that’s why, all these years later, we don’t expect very much. We really don’t. We don’t expect to see, any time soon, North Korean missiles beaten into Hyundais or Iranian nuclear facilities converted for quantum research or US military personnel assigned to sell black & white, wing-tip shoes. We don’t expect to see, any time soon, hospitals converted to museums dedicated to vanished diseases or cemeteries transformed into wild bird sanctuaries. We don’t expect to see, any time soon, prisons dismantled or police cars assigned to taxi duty. We don’t expect to see, any time soon, homeless shelters and food banks out of business or John Aeschbury (BREAD’s lead organizer) out of a job. That’s all for “some day” — some day in the far off future — but not for now. Now we don’t expect much at all.

Oh, we do expect that our loved ones go to God when they die. We do expect that God will get us through a discouraging spell of career confusion. We do expect that God will comfort our friends when life is hurting them more than they ever imagined possible. And we do expect our prayers to rise up to God’s presence, even if we don’t expect much to come of those prayers.

We’ve been waiting so long — not ten days, but two thousand years! We’ve been waiting so long, and in all that time nothing much has changed. So we don’t expect much now.

But what we receive is far beyond our limited expectations. If only we look for it, if only we see it. Again and again, I keep coming back to this: Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It doesn’t look like much now. But just you wait!” That parable tells me to refocus my expectations. I’m an American, and like most Americans I’m impressed by the tallest building, the fastest car, the deepest canyon, and the widest gorge. But the presence and work of the Holy Spirit tend to be more subtle than superlative. The flashiness of Pentecost — with the roaring wind, the tongues of fire, and all the different languages — is not the norm.

Some people today talk about a “Third Wave” of the Holy Spirit. The Christian Reformed synod will be reflecting on that so-called Third Wave when it meets in a couple of weeks. Proponents of the Third Wave see the Spirit of God moving these days in superlative ways. They see the Spirit inspiring modern-day prophets and apostles, healing terminal diseases, and driving leagues of demons out of cities, out of whole territories. And the Spirit may indeed be at work in these ways — though I am cautious about it all, especially when it comes to talk of modern-day apostles! The Spirit may be at work in these ways, but the work of the Spirit tends to be more subtle than that. It’s the mustard seed again.

Do you know what the Apostle Paul considered the primary evidence of the Spirit’s presence? Not “signs and wonders,” not miracles, but faith, hope, and love — faith, hope, and love expressing themselves through renewed and transformed lives. And this renewal, this transformation is not usually something flashy, but instead something oh so mundane.

You know those visits some of you have been making to Grace DeJong, especially now while she’s adjusting to her new home at Crown Pointe? You’re not making those visits just because you’re nice — though you are nice. No, you’re there because the Holy Spirit has been shaping you over the years, filling you with love and compassion. And you know those prayers that some of you say every day, prayers for the church, prayers for me? They express God’s Spirit leading you, leading you into this particular act of faith. And the thirty-five (or so) of us who were at the BREAD assembly a few weeks ago? We weren’t there because we like snarled traffic, parking hassles, and big crowds. We were there because the Spirit has been moving us, slowly and steadily, into the work of justice, as an expression of the hope we have in Jesus Christ, hope for a better world. Examples could be multiplied, but I’ll leave that to you.

Now, here’s one more thing. This work of the Holy Spirit is not limited to us, it’s not limited to Christians. Peter quotes the prophet Joel: “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” And God does just that.

A few weeks ago, We Believe Ohio sponsored a legislative action day. Members from Columbus, Cleveland, and elsewhere around the state gathered in Columbus in order to meet with state legislators and with representatives of the governor. There we were: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Unitarians; all of us with a common concern for our poor and vulnerable neighbors. I was one of the spokespeople for my group. Each time I spoke I made sure to say this: that we were not there because we were nice people, nice people who care about our neighbors; no, we were there because we were responding to the call of God to be good neighbors. From all those different religious traditions, we had come together, heeding the call of God. That's the work of the Holy Spirit, leading us to act in faith, hope, and love — even if we practice that faith and express that hope in many ways.

There is, no doubt, much more to see of the Holy Spirit at work. But, remember this: the Spirit is sovereign; the Spirit is God Almighty. The Spirit need not conform to our expectations, and the Spirit does not conform to our expectations. So our hopes may be disappointed. But disappointed hopes are not the end of the world. Any Red Sox fan knows that. There's still today's game. There's still tomorrow's game. There's still next season.

The Spirit is doing plenty today. The Spirit will be doing plenty tomorrow. And when the time is right, what we've been hoping for most of all will be here. Jesus will come!

And the Spirit will keep us and the world until then.