

“In the Spirit”

New Testament Lesson: Acts 2:2-4, 12-19

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
May 31, 2020**

On Friday, May 22, the President declared that governors must permit churches to reopen that very weekend. To which churches across the country responded, “We never closed.” The point is, church is not a building but a people, not a sanctuary but a lifestyle, not a place but a Spirit. We don’t need bricks and mortar to form the church. What forms a church is the Spirit of God, a love and knowledge of Jesus and his teachings, and a commitment to the Lord.

We see that in today’s scripture reading, where the Spirit of the Lord comes upon the earliest disciple and empowers them to become the church. Acts tell us, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place,” in Jerusalem for the Festival of Weeks, which becomes our Pentecost celebration.

“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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

That is how God forms the church, by sending his Spirit upon us and calling us to turn our lives over to Christ. Those who do so, we are the church. We are called out from among all people, set apart for a special role in life. From the moment the Spirit of God comes upon us as followers of Christ, we are forever changed. And as long as we are living into our calling, the world will see us differently, just like what happened to the earliest disciples.

Acts tells us that the sound of rushing wind caused a large crowd of Jews from every nation to gather around the disciples. And “all (in the crowd are) amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’” And still “others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” Have you ever felt that way? As a Christian, have you ever felt that the world just doesn’t understand you? That what’s important to you, what you hold dear is different? Have you ever looked at the world around you and wondered how can people not see what’s really going on here?

The reason people don’t see it – don’t see the world as it is, don’t see what’s taking shape right before their eyes, don’t see what is truly possible when it comes to God’s will for us – the reason people don’t see it is because they lack integrity, or maybe it’s vision, or imagination that they lack. Integrity, vision and imagination – that’s just what the Spirit of God gives us as followers of Christ. Peter, when confronted by a world that just didn’t see it, relied on the Spirit of God to give him integrity, vision and imagination.

“Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you,” says Peter, “and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘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....’”
Prophecy, vision and dreams – integrity, vision and imagination. It’s all the same.

As Christians, we are called to seek out – and rely upon – the spiritual gifts of prophecy, visions and dreams, whether within ourselves or through those whom God sends our way. How do you know if you have the spiritual gifts of prophecy, visions and dreams? Well, it has to do with where your focus is in life. Are you focused on the ways of the world or on ways of God?

God’s way is always true, and that’s what prophecy is – truly seeing things for how they are, and taking a stand for that. The prophets of God did not so much predict the future as tell the truth. Truth-telling is an act of prophecy. And yet, we all know people who live in denial, and we’ve all been there ourselves. It’s hard to come to terms with life as it is. The danger here is getting stuck in the past.

Prophetic people are those who look at the here-and-now and have a solid understanding of reality, based on their knowledge and love of God. For example, the mother who cautions her children about going astray is speaking from a place of prophecy, a place of knowing what’s what – the world will steer you wrong if you let it. We need the Spirit of prophecy to keep us grounded in reality.

And yet, as Christians, as those called to live into God’s vision of things, we are never comfortable or happy with this fallen world of ours. We are always looking toward the world as it will be as it takes shape out ahead of us.

Those with the gift of seeing the future as it takes shape – they have the gift of spiritual visions. They can look at things as they are and, in that, see what is emerging, what is taking shape out ahead of them.

For instance, if someone in the household isn’t keeping track of family finances, then that family is at risk being blindsided by money troubles. You can see it as plain as day – the future taking shape right before your eyes. When you have this clarity of vision to see things taking shape, that empowers you – invites you – to see things differently, to see things as they are, yes, but then to dream of things as they could be.

As Christians – as the church – we’re are not meant to accept things as they are, or resign ourselves to what is taking shape around us. We are made to dream dreams. Dreams are the “what’s possible” in all of this. If prophesy is “what’s what,” and spiritual vision is what’s taking shape, then dreams are full of possibility, pointing us toward the future God has in store for us.

Think about what God would want for you in the years ahead, even amid all the uncertainty swirling around us. What would be your dream future? Maybe it’s a new job, or a hobby, a better relationship with someone in your family and better relations among people the world over, a more balanced way of living, less stress, more joy and peace.

Whatever it is that God plants in your heart as an inner dream, claim that dream for yourself. Then begin to envision it coming true. What would that look like? Reaching out more, joining a new group, taking on a new discipline, some spiritual practice or daily routine. Even amid these uncertain times – especially in these uncertain times – why not take this opportunity to dream some dreams for yourself and the world around you.

Once you’ve envisioned what that dream might be, what would bring you joy in life, take a good look at “what’s what,” do some truth-telling with yourself. And then tap into that prophetic voice of yours and call things as they are.

Make a list of what’s happening in your life, what you see taking shape right before your eyes and weigh it against what you wish were happening, what God would bless you with if your wildest dreams were to come true in keeping with God’s will.

After all, if we are the church – if it’s not the building, but rather us as God’s faithful that is the Church – then today – the day of Pentecost – is also our birthday, too. So why not? Go ahead and celebrate your spiritual birthday today by dreaming dreams for yourself and for our world. Make that birthday wish based on truth-telling, clarity of vision, and your dream of what’s truly possible for God’s beloved children.

The Spirit of God has been sent upon us for a reason. We are not to get lost in this fallen world, but rather tap into God’s vision of how it could be – how it will be – when all people have fully embraced the Spirit of God. Amen.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**