

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Dr. Steve Wilson at the Oakmont Presbyterian Church, Oakmont, Pennsylvania on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2006.

## The Dove

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-21

<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

<sup>14</sup>But 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. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> ‘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.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

<sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Jesus never provided his followers a crystal ball. The disciples were

- shocked at his death upon a cross,
- surprised by his resurrection and left to wonder about its full meaning.

“Will you now restore the Kingdom of Israel?” they asked.

Jesus said only that it was not for them to know that timetable, but he promised this: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>1</sup> After that, Jesus was taken out of their sight.

We can assume that they were surprised by the sound of the wind and the tongues of fire that came on Pentecost and the power that would work through them.

To this day, followers of Jesus start in faith and walk in trust.

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All I remember about my confirmation was that the classes were held on Saturday mornings. We sat around an 8 foot table and listened to the minister talk. His name was Charlie Collison. He was a caring man, but, truthfully, I found him boring. I would rather have been playing softball or basketball with my friends.

Thinking about confirmation now, I don't remember ever questioning whether I would join the church. My parents belonged as did my sister. But it would be a mistake to think that I was unaware of what I was doing.

I knew that there was a power behind all that could be seen. I knew that all the beauty of the flowers had come from somewhere, someone.

I knew that this power was different than worldly power. This power worked to free people, like in the Exodus. And this power cared about those whom the world rejected, like Zacchaeus with whom Jesus ate supper.

I knew that this power was at work in the world doing surprising things like restoring sight to the blind man, and forgiving the woman caught in adultery.

And I knew that this power that had created the expansive world was somehow interested in me. I first learned this in the song, “Jesus Loves Me”.

These were not propositions that I accepted in blind trust. They had been confirmed for me in ways that were accessible to me.

I had seen Zacchaeus-like folks loved by my church.

As an active little boy, I had learned many times over the reality and the relief of forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:8

God's love had been mediated to me by my family and my church.

I don't remember the day of my confirmation, but I knew what I was doing when I decided that I would be a follower of Jesus and a member of his church.

In the same way, you confirmands have made a choice for Jesus Christ that is informed at a deep level by what you have learned and experienced.

The full meaning of that choice will become clearer over time, but this much is clear now: we are a part of a great diversity of believers in whom and through whom the power of God is at work.

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The great diversity - the people of God are a diverse people which seems to have been God's intention from the start. On the day of Pentecost people from all over the known world were present.

Today our Christian family includes:

Presbyterians & Pentecostals  
Quakers & Catholics  
Methodists & Mennonites

We come from Western European countries, Asian cities, and from African tribes.

Like the fingers on our hand, none are exactly the same and all are important to do the work given to us.

John tells us about God's intentions for the world when he says, "...to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."<sup>2</sup>

These varied fingers of God are mid-wifing a new creation.

There are some notable examples of Christian leadership:

When the world was verging on a technological explosion, Mother Theresa lived compassion among us.

In a time of increasing racial tension, Martin Luther King Jr. lived a Christian ethic of non-violent change.

In an era of increasing violence, Bishop Desmond Tutu supported a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that enabled a peaceful transition from apartheid to freedom.

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<sup>2</sup> John 1:12-13

Today, as Iran sponsors terrorism and is working to develop a nuclear bomb, it is a Christian, a Presbyterian as it happens, Condoleza Rice, who is leading our country and the world for a peaceful intervention.

These are the big headlines. Bishop N. T. Wright writes of other ways in which the power of God is working through the church to give birth to a new creation.

The church is "...a place of welcome and laughter, of healing and hope, of friends and family and justice and new life. It's where the homeless drop in for a bowl of soup and the elderly stop by for a chat. It's where one group is working to help drug addicts and another is campaigning for global justice. It's where you'll find people learning to pray, coming to faith, struggling with temptation, finding new purpose, and getting in touch with a new power to carry that purpose out. It's where people bring their own small faith and discover, in getting together with others to worship the one true God, that the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts."

That sounds overly idealistic until you realize as Wright says, "No church is like this all the time. But a remarkable number of churches are partly like that for quite a lot of the time."<sup>3</sup>

That is the choice that you are making – that we have made. That is who, by God's Spirit, we are becoming. That is how God will use us all as midwives of God's new creation.

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Outside the sanctuary of my grandparents house, turtle doves sat on the suspended telephone wires. Their song was a gentle who-who. It was a calm and comforting sound.

Knowing how the Spirit of God brooded over the first creation and descended on Jesus to start a new creation, the sound of a dove today is a gentle reminder that God is still present, still working through followers of Jesus.

When we read old world headlines, or find ourselves in old world scenarios – whether at home, in school, in the world - we remember that we are Pentecost People, often going against the current of culture, we look to Jesus and roll up our sleeves knowing that the Spirit of God is upon us, empowering us to assist in the birth of God's new world.

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<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, Simply Christian, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, p. 123