

“Sounds Like Music”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

June 5, 2022¹—The Day of Pentecost

- Romans 8:25-28
- Acts Chapter 2

We’re re-enacting part of the story we just heard: we’re followers of Jesus who have gathered together in one place. As we just heard, seven weeks after the first Easter, on the day of a Jewish harvest festival called Pentecost, Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem were gathered in one place. This group included the eleven apostles (eleven because Judas had died), plus the newest apostle, a man named Matthias, whose selection to was described in the previous chapter of the book of Acts. In addition to the apostles, the group also included perhaps a few dozen other followers of Jesus, too.

When these followers of Jesus were gathered in one place on that particular day, some strange things happened. First, a noise emanated from overhead — a noise that sounded like a very strong wind. Then — well, how can you explain this except simply to describe it? — then it was as though fiery flames came down and touched every believer gathered there. With that, these believers suddenly found themselves filled by the Holy Spirit of God, and they all began to talk at once.

Now the freaky thing is this: when the people of the neighborhood heard the commotion, they came out of their homes to check it out. In the neighborhood were Jews who had immigrated to Jerusalem from just about every country in the ancient world. They spoke many different languages. But when they arrived where the followers of Jesus were gathered, the Jewish people from all over the world could understand what the believers were saying — it was as though each Jew heard the believers speaking in his or her own language, except that all the Jews heard their own language all at the same time!

Imagine if you were one of those Jews who had left your native land in order to live near Jerusalem. As much as you delighted in now living in the heartland of the Jewish faith, surely you miss your home country, some of the special foods from back there, and especially hearing others speaking your native language. So you would be excited to hear your native tongue, but you’d be puzzled, too. That’s why the Jews asked, “How is it that in our own native languages each of us hears them telling of the great things God has done? What does this mean?” The cynics among them scoffed, “They’re just drunk.” Of course, that disparaging remark against the believers didn’t explain how it was that the Jews were hearing many different languages simultaneously.

¹ Modified from my sermon “Sounds Like Music” from June 3, 2001

What was happening was that God was sending a sign of reassurance. God was reassuring the followers of Jesus because first he had been killed but then raised from the tomb to new life. And now after forty days following being resurrected, after forty days of giving final instructions to his followers, now Jesus had left their sight again, being taken back into heaven to be “seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty” as it says in one of the historic creeds of the Church.

God wanted to reassure the believers that they were not abandoned; they were not orphaned. God wanted to reassure them that God would still look after them. So God sent signs that God’s empowering, life-giving, comforting, community-building Holy Spirit would always be with them. The believers experienced the presence of God’s Holy Spirit as though an invisible but powerful wind was swirling everywhere around them.

God’s everywhere-active, amazing Holy Spirit is God at work in us. It accomplishes in us what we can’t do ourselves.

Let me tell you a story I shared once before, many years ago. Nicholas Wolterstorff was a professor at Yale Divinity School. The Wolterstorffs had a gifted, intelligent, vivacious and much-loved son named Eric. At the age of 25, Eric Wolterstorff was killed in a mountain-climbing accident in Austria. Over the following months, Mr. Wolterstorff wrote in a diary to express and vent his grief, his struggles with a God who could allow such a tragedy to occur. So for weeks, he journaled. It helped. It helped the Wolterstorffs in working through the sorrow, the emptiness, the anger. Several years later, Mr. Wolterstorff consented to have the deeply personal poems and essays from his journal published. They came out in a book called “Lament for a Son.”

Now let’s shift the story to Germany. A professor at a university there – I’ll call him Dr. Mueller – came across Mr. Wolterstorff’s book. Dr. and Mrs. Mueller had recently lost *their* adult son, and their grief over his death had been inconsolable. But Dr. Mueller read Mr. Wolterstorff’s book; then he had his wife read it. No sooner had they both finished the book than they had an experience that can only be described as strange and wonderful. Dr. Mueller was in the living room of his home when he heard the most unusual sound. It was neither loud nor soft. It didn’t sound like anything he had ever heard in his entire life; it wasn’t an animal, or a machine, or the sounds of neighbors. The closest thing Dr. Mueller could think of was that it sounded like music – only no music like he, in all of his world travels, had ever heard before in his life.

Dr. Mueller called for his wife, and when she came into the room she stopped, paused, and then said to her husband, “Do you hear that?” He smiled and nodded. After a while, the sound went away.

They didn’t try to explain it. They didn’t feel the need to, because it was as plain as day to them that this mysterious music-like sound was a sign from their son to reassure them that he was at peace, and that no matter how long they missed him, they would never need to worry about him. The Muellers later contacted the Wolterstorffs to thank them, because the Muellers were convinced that the healing power of God’s Holy Spirit was at work through what Mr. Wolterstorff had shared.

We are in no position to say whether that phenomenon that sounded like music really happened or not, or if it really was a sign from their son or not. Quantifiable proof is irrelevant in a situation like theirs because the point is that they were convinced that God's Holy Spirit was giving them reassurance in their anguish. Perhaps they thought of the words of St. Paul, who wrote to the Christians in Rome:

But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.²

The action of God's Holy Spirit, just like God's own being, is beyond our ability to adequately describe. The working of God's Holy Spirit is as unpredictable as the tongues of fire that leap up from a log in a firepit, as unpredictable as the flames that seemed to touch the heads of all the believers who were gathered in one place. The Holy Spirit is as powerfully unpredictable as the cyclone that can drive a piece of straw through a telephone pole and then set an egg, unbroken, in the middle of a roadway; as unpredictable as the mighty wind from above that filled the whole assembly with a deafening roar – or filled the living room of two grieving parents with a prayerful, peaceful sensation that, well, sounded like music.

Pentecost is often called “the birthday of the Christian Church” because it's the day the believers saw themselves as a united body, rather than as an assembly of people with some common interest. On that day they realized that God was gifting them with spiritual abilities they had never imagined they would have.

And that still happens in the Church today – in the worldwide Christian Church, including right here at Rocky River Presbyterian Church! Friends, God's Holy Spirit is still working miraculous things in our midst:

- Helping us hear some sentences of scripture in a novel way after having heard that familiar passage many times over the years.
- Inspiring us to develop relationships with people in this church regardless of differences in age or family make-up or socio-political outlook or longevity in this congregation.
- Moving us to be freely generous with our treasures for the sake of the church and its outreach into the community and the world.
- Challenging us to imagine new and different ways of being and doing so Christ's church will continue to be relevant and effective in a changing world.

Now let's be clear:

- The Holy Spirit is not Superman, coming to the rescue in the nick of time every time you land yourself in trouble.
- The Holy Spirit is not a genie or magic wand to make bad things miraculously good.
- The Holy Spirit is not a hotline to God, enabling you to cut to the front of the request line.

² From Romans 8:25-28

- You can no more control the Holy Spirit than you can teach a cat to play bridge.

But you don't have to control or manage the Holy Spirit. You simply welcome God's Spirit into your life, and allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers, in your service to others, in your relationships at school and home and work. Let God's Holy Spirit surprise you with what God wants to accomplish through you. For you — yes, even you — have a role to play in bringing God's will to earth as it is in heaven.

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