

“A Day for Mystery, Community, and Dreams”

Acts 2:1–21

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May 19, 2024

New Testament scholar Michal Beth Dinkler says that we often experience God’s strange ways of working in the world as confusing, overwhelming, or even negative, and thus, we don’t realize what is happening until much later (*workingpreacher.org*). To underscore this reality, she references these words of Margaret Atwood.

When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by ten icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it.

It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else (*Alias Grace*, p. 298).

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Such is the case with the events described in Acts 2, the familiar Pentecost narrative in which people speak in multiple languages. We attach meaning to this story. It’s about the beginning of the church and the coming of the Spirit. It’s about diverse people being brought together. But these are perspectives developed with the benefit of time. In the moment, everyone struggles to make sense of what is happening.

We might think the disciples get it, Peter especially, since he seeks to correct misunderstandings, but he doesn’t understand completely. Part of the message is about everyone being included in God’s love. “*Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” he says. But he doesn’t yet believe Gentiles will be included. It will take a vision of unclean food, God’s voice, and a Centurian named Cornelius to

convince him. The people who hear in their own languages are amazed and perplexed, as they say, “What does this mean?” They don’t get it. Others who are there sneer, saying, “They are filled with new wine.” In other words, they think everyone is drunk!

No one understands at the time. As Peter notes, Joel prophesied about a day when God would pour out the Spirit upon all flesh, but this pouring out is extraordinary! It begins with a sound from heaven like the rush of a violent wind, a sound that fills the house where the disciples are. Divided tongues, as of fire appear among them, and a tongue rests on each. Then, Jewish people from every nation who are in Jerusalem hear the disciples speaking in their own languages.

This is confusion, a dark roaring, like a house in a whirlwind, to use Margaret Atwood’s words. Efforts have been made to understand it, and we will make another one today, but before we do, it’s worth our time to pause before the mystery.

For we live in a time when we seem to demythologize everything. Science has come up with an explanation for so many things that we are tempted to believe there is no mystery that cannot be explained. But while this may seem like enlightenment, to lose all sense of mystery, any possibility of the Holy, is not good for us nor does it square with reality.

In his book *Who Needs God* Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story about two men who persuaded an Indian guide to take them to the top of Mount Rainier. It is a sacred site for Native Americans, they believe there is a lake of fire at the top, and they are forbidden from climbing it. But these men paid the guide to take them part of the way. When they got to the top, they planted a flag, took pictures, and felt like heroes.

But Kushner has a differ take on this story. We keep putting out sacred fires, he says, we keep explaining things away, to our detriment. We are losing all sense of the holy and have almost lost our capacity for awe. Human beings have a need for mystery, and the world is filled with it. Science hasn’t explained everything. In fact, sometimes new learning complicates things. For example, light can be viewed as a wave and a particle. The birth of children is a mystery, love is a mystery, the northern lights are a mystery. We understand many things about such realities, but our understanding does not explain it all.

The good news for us is that we gather each week in this place that draws the eye upward, stirs the mind to contemplation, and fills the heart with wonder. Our sanctuary is not like any other space in which we regularly spend time. It is designed to evoke a sense of awe.

Fannie Memory Mitchell had friends from Austria who visited her each year. When they did, they always came to worship, and every time they talked about how worshipful this space is, how similar it is to the great cathedrals in Europe, but how different from many worship spaces in this country. There is value in different kinds of worship spaces, but we need something to evoke a sense of awe in our lives.

What takes place on Pentecost does this for everyone involved. The Spirit is poured out more fully than ever before. There is a rush of wind, there are tongues of fire, disciples speak languages they don't know, and diverse people are brought together. Something awesome is happening, something mysterious, something that cannot be explained.

And yet, we try to make some sense of it, and as we do, we realize it is about the Spirit coming in full, but what exactly does this mean? Many things, but today it begins with the gift of language which makes community possible. We cannot feel a connection to others if we cannot talk to each other. Community depends on communication, intimacy requires the capacity to speak each other's language, and this applies not just to different languages like German, but to dialects within languages.

I remember driving to Lake Norman from Winston-Salem with an Irish friend in the church there for a youth event. We had to make a detour because of a wreck on the freeway and got lost on the backroads. The first place we stopped, Trevor went inside and asked for directions. He came out scratching his head and apparently the worker in the store was even more bewildered. He didn't speak Irish! The next place we stopped I told Trevor to let me do the talking. I'm from that part of the state which doesn't speak Irish or English. It is a variety of Southern where we say MAH-ma and yee-iss. I was able to get directions quickly.

We can't build community without speaking each other's language, and this includes various dialects, as well as the language of culture and ideology. Arthur Schlesinger wrote a book in the 1990s in which he

talked about the Balkanization of America. He worried that our increasingly tribal interests and ethnic identities would unravel the fragile bond of American culture and create the kind of social disintegration that led to ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3). Three decades later, we are still headed in this direction. We need something to transcend our differences, something to bind us together.

We need what the Spirit does on Pentecost. We need a way to speak to each other, if not a common language, something like the universal translator in *Star Trek* that enables people from different planets to hear and understand each other. This is what the Spirit makes possible as people from all nations gather in Jerusalem. Acts scholar Willie Jenkins puts it this way. “God speaks people, fluently. And God, with all the urgency that is the Holy Spirit, wants the disciples of (the) only begotten Son to speak people fluently too (*Acts: A theological Commentary on the Bible*).” To speak people is to hear and understand.

In a Pentecost sermon on this theme, Presbyterian pastor Amy Starr Redwine includes a story about sociologist Matthew Desmond (*Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2024, pp. 46-47). He grew up in a poor family, but while working on a book on the housing crisis in America, he lived in a mobile home park in the south side of Milwaukee, and saw a level of poverty he had never seen before — grandmas living without heat in the winter, kids getting evicted.

He spent time with these families, watched their kids, slept on their floors, went with them to eviction court and shelters, ate at their tables, went to funerals. In the process, he learned to speak their language, listened to them, got to know them. He also got to know the landlords, helped them fix up their properties and pass out eviction notices. He learned to speak people, fluently, and thus, was able to form deep bonds. That’s what it will take for the church to grow stronger and model a better way to deal with differences. That’s what the Spirit provides.

The Spirit comes in full on Pentecost and makes possible the kind of communication that builds community, and we should note that in this community, everyone is welcome — young and old, male and female,

slave and free. *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord...* everyone is welcome, and more than this, everyone has a voice, agency. When the Spirit is poured out, the text says, sons and daughters prophecy, young and old see visions, slave and free are empowered. There is no second-class citizenship in the realm of God.

Like communication, this principle builds community, but it is challenging. No matter what we claim to believe, we value people differently based on a long list of distinctions. Sometimes it seems like a Kriss Kristofferson lyric is our theme — everybody's gotta have somebody to look down on. Is it reasonable to imagine a different way of being, a community where we don't do this, a nation where we value *all* people? Is the church envisioned in scripture not a crazy pipedream? Perhaps, but Joel talks about dreaming as something connected to the Spirit of God. Is it crazier to dream of community or to quit dreaming?

In his book *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* Robert Fulghum tells a story about Hans Ludwig Bablinger (p. 191f). He was a craftsman in the 16th century who made artificial limbs and dreamed of flying. So, he also crafted wings for himself, and one day he tried out those wings in the Bavarian Alps where upcurrents abound, and he flew!

Beaming with confidence, in the spring of 1594, he decided to demonstrate his gift for King Ludwig and his court in Ulm. Unfortunately, downcurrents prevail there, and Bablinger rode them straight down like a cannonball into the river. He survived, only to be mocked from the pulpit by the Bishop of Ulm who shamed him for the sin of pride, saying, "MAN WAS NOT MEANT TO FLY!"

Ironically, Fulghum notes, most people who go to Ulm today are tourists, and the very few solemn people who sit before the pulpit during Sunday services are outnumbered by the hang-gliders flying in flocks off the foothills in the bright morning air in the great cathedral of the world.

There are always naysayers for any dream, but the future belongs to the dreamers, to those who envision a better world. There is no dream more important than the one where diverse people learn to live together, welcome all, and give everyone a voice. Pentecost proclaims that this dream is not only possible, it is of God. The Spirit is poured out to make it so. We dare not dismiss it simply because it is large and mysterious!