

May 31, 2020

New Normal

Shepherd's Grace Church

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.' ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ "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.

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

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

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."
(Acts 2: 1-21)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

(John 20: 19-23)

Pentecost! Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, God fulfills a promise. Last week, we learned of that promise. "Remain here in Jerusalem until God sends you the fulfillment of His promise, the promise of the Holy Spirit. For John baptized with water but I will baptize you with the Holy Spirit; and not many days from now!" (Acts 1 paraphrased)

Now, Jesus was taken up to Heaven forty days after the resurrection and Pentecost takes place a full 10 days later. The Spirit, which was promised soon was not subject to the soon we know. When we hear soon, most of us think now! This is not a concept we have grown in to, but rather, a concept we have been trained in to.

Think back with me. When we were kids growing up, we asked our parents, "Are we there yet," and they would answer "Soon!" They taught us to believe that soon was now, or at least, almost now. When we asked, "Can we go swimming now," they answered "Soon!" When we asked about dessert or about dinner or about opening Christmas presents their answer was always the same. "Soon!"

Imagine the disciples upon hearing that God's promise of the Holy Spirit would be not many days from now and thinking, "Wow! It will probably happen today!" I suspect their conditioning was much the same as ours. "Soon" means now!

The Holy Spirit, however teaches the first lesson to the disciples even before the Spirit reaches them. The Spirit acts according to the will of the Spirit and not according to the whim of spoiled children too impatient to recognize that God is indeed in charge of bringing about God's plan! The Holy Spirit made the people wait so that the work of the Lord could be fully comprehended.

Pentecost was a deeply ingrained part of Jewish culture! The holiday was indeed a High Holy Day! It was a day when all people from all nations were gathered from the diaspora, the scattering, in a Holy City replete with

memories of David and Solomon and the kings of days gone by. It was also more than that. It was a day of first fruits.

Let's be clear, it was not the first day of first fruits. That day belongs to Jesus as do all firsts that are of any significance in human history. Jesus alone remains the first fruit of resurrection as he is the lone loaf that is celebrated at the barley festival held the day after Passover is completed. He alone is the reason we celebrate the Lord's Supper with leavened bread after the resurrection. But Pentecost is the celebration of the two loaves, the loaves that remind us of God's command to gather all together and offer the very first fruit of the wheat harvest to God.

Pentecost is also the day of the giving of the Law or Torah. When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai on this day, he gave the Law. When the disciples of Jesus were gathered in one place, they received the Spirit which can be understood to be the clarification of the Law. According to John, it is the Spirit's responsibility to remind all people of the Law and interpret it according to Jesus' teaching.

It is not coincidence that the Spirit made the disciples wait for the fullness of Pentecost, but rather, it is fulfillment. God's timing is impeccable and invites us to wait, to watch, and to wonder at the signs that are right in front of us if we only think them through and wait patiently for them to be fulfilled.

The childish response to "Soon" is to pout when the wait seems unbearable. That however is not the response of the disciples. As we observed last week, these are no longer the petulant, pouting children Mark describes in his Gospel. Instead, these are the mature, patient, amazed people of God who wait when God says wait and who move when God says move!

In Acts 1 we learned that after Jesus' departure, these disciples did as they were instructed. They returned to Jerusalem to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. They entered the house and devoted themselves to prayer while waiting. They worshiped and sang and gave praise to God!

Instead of grumbling like the chosen people of old, like Aaron and Miriam and the tribe God led out of Egypt, they patiently did as they were commanded to do. They ignored the hardship of their task and trusted in the Lord and the promise he had made to them. For this reason, on the day of Pentecost, they were all gathered in one place, the place the Lord had instructed them to go...and wait. This became their new normal!

As Peter reminds us, "Once they were no people, now, they are God's people!" (1Peter 2) and as God's people, they trust God's timing and study God's

lessons from the past in order to anticipate God's revelation in the future. They believe God will break in in the present to prepare a future for them that leads, not to the satisfaction of their own desires, but to the coming of God's Kingdom! A Kingdom where they remember God's promise and its fulfillment!

So, they wait patiently in one place! When the time is fulfilled, that exact place, the place they were instructed to be is filled with a sound...a sound from heaven like the rush of a violent wind. The disciples do not shrink from this wind. Instead they embrace it...they anticipate it! You see, this is not the first time they had heard or heard tell of this sound.

These disciples knew their scripture and they spoke both Hebrew and Greek and they knew that in both the word spirit also meant wind and breath, so they knew that in Genesis 1, the wind or breath or spirit which hovered above the face of the deep before creation began was in fact the Wind or the Breath or the Spirit of God and that when God spoke, all creation came into being! That wind that came from the mouth of God was the Word (Jesus) riding on the Wind and it was a wild ride! (Gen. 1)

They also knew that the breath breathed into the man in Gen. 2 was the Breath of God and that breath or Spirit brought life! Beyond that, they remembered the violent wind that blew into the cave of Elijah after he fled from Jezebel and that the Wind that spoke was the one and same Spirit of God! (1Kings 18) They remembered that when their people were in danger of being captured by Pharaoh as they stood on the banks of the sea, it was the same Wind that had brought all things into creation that parted the seas!

These mature, dedicated, patient disciples knew their Scripture and they knew the signs of God's revelation. The rush they heard was none other than the voice of God! They also knew when tongues of fire appeared they were the same tongues that led the Israelites out of Egypt by night.

In the passage I shared with you this morning, there was no fear! There was no worry! There was no sense of dread! There was only worship, praise, and eagerness to serve the One True God who had raised Jesus from the dead and who had invited them to receive salvation because of the Amazing Grace poured out on each of them. What they knew was their new normal!

No longer were they waiting for instruction. No longer were they wondering when God would show up. No longer were they marching in place! This was the day of Pentecost and were the first fruits of the harvest, a harvest that was to be greater than any they could have ever imagined.

On Pentecost, the words of Jesus rang once again in their ears. "The fields are ripe for the harvest but the laborers are few!" (John 4) Not only were they the first fruits of the harvest, they were now the harvesters! They were the laborers! They knew the song, "These are the days of Elijah! The fields are as white in this world. We are the laborers in Your vineyard, preparing the way of the Lord!" They understood their mission. They were to "Go and baptize all the nations, claiming them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28) and they knew that God would be with them always, even to the end of the age! This was their new normal!

The disciples, calm and connected to the Holy Spirit were not bewildered or confused. They knew Pentecost was a perfect time to spread the "Good News" to the ends of the earth. They knew it was God's command that all Jewish people return to Jerusalem for the Holiday. They knew this was the very best time of year for families and faithful to travel. They also knew God used God's calendar to communicate God's message.

It was no surprise to them that there were people from every nation under the heavens staying in Jerusalem during the Holiday season. Probably many of them had been in the city since Passover. Probably some of them were present at the crucifixion when their leaders were shouting "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

As they accepted the promised gifts from God's Holy Spirit, they immediately put those gifts to use. They were not like the slave who buried their talent. They were like the bold servants who used what they had to gain even more. When the crowd showed up, they went to work! This was their new normal!

Normal...the old normal for the people of all the nations was to think of these men as Galileans. Galileans are typically less-educated and looked down upon. They are segregated and discriminated against because they are thought to be less than. When the more sophisticated cosmopolitan community shows up they are bewildered and confused.

They hear people who should not be able to speak to them speaking to them in language they can not only understand but in language that is compelling. They cannot believe their ears...that is, until they start listening! As they listen, they realize that something incredible has taken place! They realize that God has gotten involved in God's creation and as a result, His power has been exerted.

The disciples speak to these people so plainly and concisely that the people cannot help but understand. They understand so completely that all that is left to them is a choice.

Do I believe?

Do I turn away?

For those who are witness to God's mighty acts and motivated to share the information they have, this is the place God's Spirit has been leading them. It is not their responsibility to ask the question. It is their responsibility to get these people to ask the question for themselves. The choice is in the hands, not of those sharing, but of those being shared with. These mature, patient disciples, now well trained by the power of the Holy Spirit understand that they do the working, but God...and God alone does the winning. This is the new normal!

As has been the case since the time of Jesus, those called to witness are not called to prepare their testimony. Jesus tells them that it will be given to them at the time of their trial in words more eloquent than they are capable of. (John 15) When they share what they have been taught, some ask, what does this mean that the message is so simple that even I can understand it. Their answer is to acknowledge! Their answer is to be inspired, to be moved, to profess their newfound faith and to rejoice with those who are gathered in the house on the day of Pentecost! Their faith becomes their new normal!

Some, however do not receive their testimony. Instead, they attack the credibility of their witness. They accuse them of being drunk. They sneer at the possibility that these less than could be greater than them in their faith. They step away and spread falsehoods to others and emulate the "brood of vipers" that John the Baptist indicted when he first began his work. Sadly, their accusation becomes their new normal!

But there is something else about the new normal. While some do not believe there is a movement beginning to rise. Peter saw it. He recognized that everything had changed. Peter, the one who cowered in fear on that fateful night when Christ was crucified saw something different!

Suddenly, God's gift is present once in the world. This gift that all should have recognized in Jesus, the gift of grace was once again a part of the world and everything was changed. Peter recognized the opportunity to speak to the change. He remembered that once, no one knew that God walked among God's people. He remembered that once everyone had a chance to recognize the mighty acts of God but very few did. Peter knew that this wonderful new normal he was sensing was a chance to change all that.

He stepped forward!

Now, the last time Peter was heard from publicly was on that night fifty days ago. On that night, he spoke meekly...“I do not know Him.” He cowered in the shadows and stood with the enemy. Something had happened in the forty days when Jesus made himself known after the resurrection. Peter now knew a new normal, a normal that encouraged and empowered. He believed that he could make a difference and he willingly stepped up.

When he heard the sound of the rushing wind, He knew that God was still at work in the world. Yes, he remembered the sound he had been told about. He remembered the creation story and the story of Elijah and of Moses but he also remembered the parts of the story that told of God’s on-going creation. He heard the message of Genesis 1 that said what God saw was good and not perfect. He believed from what he had learned at Jesus’ feet that God was not finished yet. Peter knew a new normal; a normal where God would use human beings filled with the power of God’s Holy Spirit to accomplish the coming of God’s kingdom.

Peter, empowered with the knowledge given by the risen Lord and filled with the gift of God’s Holy Spirit stepped forward and into a new normal!

The old normal, the normal known before Jesus was gone. Peter recognized it. He understood that which was given to all to understand. Before the resurrection, the history of the world was moving toward the cross. Before the resurrection, the world was mired in sin and sickness and failure. Before the cross the world was without hope. Hopelessness was the old normal but Peter knew the new.

He knew that after the cross, after denial and betrayal there was forgiveness and life. He knew that after the cross history changed its course. After the cross, the world now moved parallel with the cross. The world moved in ways of forgiveness and love! Peter knew.

When he stepped forward, it was to share this exciting new revelation, a revelation given by God’s gift of the Holy Spirit, a Breath breathed gift of life where before there was only death. Peter knew.

Listen he said. There is a sound! Do you not hear? Do you not perceive? It is not the sound of heartache and hatred! It is the sound of God giving God’s plan for the future. Once we had no hope, now we have God and God is giving God’s word through the gift of his very breath! God breathed God’s message long before God made it a reality.

In the days of Joel, God told of this new path. He told of a life of promise and hope. He told of the way the message would be shared and of what the message would be.

In those days, the days after the cross, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh! Men and women, young and old, slave and free...all flesh shall see the glory of the Lord and live! All flesh shall know the power of God and live! All flesh shall imagine together a world where God's will guides their lives because God's love has overcome their death! They will tell of these stories and they will tell of them together and all flesh, Jew and Greek, Black and white...all flesh shall see the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord! This was the new normal and Peter knew it!

The old things had passed away that the new things were made real and Peter knew it. He believed it because he had lived through the trials and the defeats of the old and had been restored into the new. It was this new that he stepped forward to share. It was this new normal that he invited all people to. It was this new normal that ran parallel to the cross with its saving power to which Peter was speaking and it was this new normal that transcended the few and was extended to the all!

Newsboy says it this way,

It's the song of the redeemed rising from the African plain

It's the song of the forgiven drowning out the Amazon rain

The song of Asian believers filled with God's holy Fire!

It's every tribe every tongue, every nation a love song born of a grateful choir

It's all God's children singing Glory Glory He reigns!

Peter saw it. Peter believed it and he stepped forward to share it with those willing to accept it. It was the new normal that was on the other side of the cross and it was only available from the other side of the cross. It was only available when sin and sadness and sickness had been taken away and was replaced by love!

For the last several months, the lead news story of the day has been the summary of yesterday's virus count and death toll. It has dominated our nation and our world. It has been all we have been about and the debate about it has been fierce. People have argued over focus and over freedom. They have responded to perceptions and to realities that only they have

experienced. The truth is that we have all experienced this pandemic in our own way and with our own sets of struggles and sacrifices.

So long has this gone on that I have mused many times about what event or action it might take to knock it from the lead in our daily news. I thought of events like this in the past and looked for the signs that would lead our nation and our world beyond the immediate and into the possible.

This week, unfortunately, the event that overshadowed Covid was not an event of new proportions but an old event that once again raised its ugly head. When George Ford was killed early this week the world once again moved toward the cross. The world once again moved to re-write history by putting hatred and hopelessness front and center. The world did not, would not, could not recognize a new normal. Instead, the world moved to the normal normal; the normal where hatred and bigotry and violence are perpetrated against others.

The world moved to a place where ugliness replaced beauty and where bitterness replaced the sweet sound of voices joined in harmony.

What did it take to move covid off the front page? Nothing much. Just normal normal. It took people sneering just as in the days of the giving of the Holy Spirit. Some sneered because they just could not see the gift! They sneered because they were unable to accept that the reality of the world was not the reality of God!

Bitterness and hatred returned as the normal normal. Crucify Him! Crucify Him they cried because they knew nothing else.

Today, however, God gives us something else. God gives a new normal, a normal where we listen as God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh.

We listen as men and women imagine a new normal; a normal where people work together regardless of sex. A reality where differences are put aside to come together for the common good.

We listen as old men see visions of a new normal; a normal where people put life ahead of stuff, a normal where values are on our humanity and not on our hubris.

We listen as young men dream dreams of a new normal; a normal where we all work together, listening to the leadership of those who are wiser than we are and following their advice so that we can find out what we might be able to accomplish if we all work together. We listen to dreams of a normal where,

when we recognize mistakes we do not point fingers and lay blame, but instead, where we work together to rectify those errors and move on.

We listen as slaves, those who have been persecuted and put upon for no reason other than their difference in appearance outline a new normal; a normal where we sit and listen to the differences in their experiences at the hands of their oppressors and our experiences as people of privilege and we, all of us give credence to their experience and count it as valid and not as valueless!

We recognize the signs in the heavens and the portents in the earth below as the new normal, signs that point us in a direction parallel to the cross, signs that point us toward forgiveness and love, signs that remind us that we have been redeemed; that all of us have been redeemed and as redeemed people, we can once again stand in God's presence and the first fruits of God's harvest. New normal reminds us that these gifts are gifts of grace!

In grace we can step into a new normal, a normal where all people...yes! All people stand before God and call upon the name of the Lord and are saved, not because we deserve it but because God loves us that much.

This is the new normal that must replace the normal normal. It is a dream, it is a vision, it is a hope but so was the hope of this great nation when it was first founded. So was the hope of this nation when it abolished slavery. So was the hope of this nation when it gave all people the right to vote.

We are a nation of the new normal. That is our normal normal and we must move to this normal if we are to overcome the hatred and bitterness of the other side of the cross. WE must recognize that we no longer live on that side. Instead, we live on the side where we have seen our sin washed away and our hope restored.

We must recognize the new normal of Pentecost...the new normal of love!
Amen!