

“Marching Orders”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Acts 2:1-24
June 4, 2017 — Day of Pentecost

We often hear Pentecost referred to as the “birthday of the Church.” This story tells how a group of disciples and believers and curious onlookers got kicked in the pants and sent to go be the Church in the world.

It’s important to recognize that the Day of Pentecost is not, however, the birthday of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is attested to throughout scripture, starting way back in the opening verses of Genesis, as “a wind from God” swept over the waters of creation. God’s breath, God’s wind, God’s Spirit has been at work throughout the story of the people of God. But here, with drama and pyrotechnics, the Spirit is poured out in a new way on God’s people, and they receive their marching orders.

Oh how nice it would be if, like a how-to video or a commencement address, God pushed the Church out of the nest with a step-by-step list of instructions, organized into pithy, easily digestible, alliterative mnemonics. Could we, perhaps, have a pamphlet, Holy Spirit? Some of us would prefer spreadsheets. Ah, but that is not how God’s Spirit works. God’s Spirit does not *do* tidy or comfortable. God’s Spirit is not so much into filing or ledgers or crisp lines. God’s Spirit is not interested in learning new ways to fold laundry.

God’s Spirit gets people’s attention. The Spirit causes a scene. The Spirit is bewildering and wild. The Spirit speaks all of the languages, and all at once. The Spirit will make sure you can hear, but the words will pour forth from one who does not look like you. The Spirit is not tame. The Spirit is not playing around, but moves with the power of wind and fire. The Spirit is not yours to claim or contain or control. Don’t try to catch and manipulate a tongue of fire, ‘cause you will get singed. The Spirit is not for your use or your claim of exclusivity. In fact, if you want to experience it, you’re going to have to go be with people who are different from you — because that’s where the Spirit hangs out.

They were gathered for a festival — the weird stuff always happens on the holidays — and suddenly all Spirit breaks loose. They heard it before they saw or felt anything — “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” — and it filled the house. And that’s when they started seeing...things. Luke says “divided tongues, as of fire” appeared and rested on them, and for two thousand years we’ve all acted like we have any idea what that really means, as if “divided tongues as of fire” is a sensible description. It’s not, and it shouldn’t be, because this whole thing is confusing as Spirit. Next, they all get filled with the Holy Spirit and start talking in other languages. Berlitz and Rosetta Stone and Duolingo have got nothing on God’s Spirit.

The wind-rush sound and the sudden speaking were loud enough to draw a crowd. And it was an international crowd. Jews from all over, in town for the holiday, who’d been walking past each other muttering to their *paisans* “ugh, Elamites. And watch out for those Pamphylans,” were suddenly standing shoulder to shoulder wondering what the heck was going on. They looked at people so foreign to them and saw in their eyes clear recognition of the words that were coming from the mouths of the

disciples, and it rattled them. *How can they be understanding what I'm understanding? And how are any of us understanding those redneck Galileans? They're talking about God, y'all. What is going on?* It was quite the moment of awestruck unity, but that passed quickly. Some were curious, wondering what deep spiritual or cosmic significance this disturbance could have. Others simply pointed and hollered "They're druuuuunk!"

Peter stood and cleared things up. This wasn't early morning holiday drunkenness. This was a different kind of Spirit being poured out. This was fulfillment of prophecy. God was up to something, and it meant dreams and visions and prophesying. God had been up to something with Jesus. And God had done something miraculous and impossible and wild. And y'all better get used to miraculous and impossible and wild, because that's what just happened, and that's what's going to continue to happen.

This is the birth of the Church. Not the laying of a cornerstone or the formation of a board or the cashing of a check or the calling to order of a meeting. The Church is born in a fit of impossibly wild mayhem and dreams and visions and confusion and language. And from the next chapter of the book of Acts all the way up to today we, the members of the body of Christ have done our level best to try to tame the wild and control the chaos and stifle the dreams. But we've also had our excellent moments of letting God's Spirit lead us, trusting that maybe God knows how to do such things.

We've got three pretty amazing young adults whom today will be confirming their faith, confirming the promises made on their behalf at their baptisms. Sarah, Adrian, and Olivia — I know we have made you sit through some boring things over the years. I know we have asked you to be quiet and proper and so very Presbyterian. But I pray that we have also kindled the fire of your dreams and your vision and taught you that you have voices that are prophetic. I pray that we haven't tamed you. I pray that you know that the wild and the impossible is part of our story and, therefore, your story. I pray that we've let you cause some mayhem.

We can't deny who we are. We're Edgewood Presbyterian. We like our hymns. We like our meetings. We like being super nice. We like being fiercely nerdy about a lot of things. We don't always clap on the right beat. We're adorably awkward sometimes. It's in our congregational DNA.

We can't deny who we are. We're Edgewood Presbyterian. Your home. Your church. We like being kind of opinionated. We don't like being judgmental. We're kind of goofy. We take Jesus way more seriously than we take ourselves. We value justice and hospitality in the name of the Lord of welcome and peace. We think asking questions is a gift of the Spirit. We know we don't have all the answers. We know the Spirit is way ahead of us, but we're willing to try to play catch up. We think you are incredible people, and we hope we had something to do with that.

You are about to be full adult members of this congregation. That means so much more than getting to vote when we have our incredibly orderly congregational meetings. It means that you are now expected to be listening in a new way for the sounds of the Spirit moving in our midst. It means you have to help us see how God is throwing impossible and wild opportunities our way. As you live into the fullness of your confirmation, remind us of how God gives marching orders. You are not the future of the Church. You are the immediate-present-right now of the Church. Thanks be to God.

Sarah, our high school graduate, Youth Group graduate, and soon-to-be student at UAB, we hope we'll

get to see you on Sunday mornings, still. As you start this next piece of your life, wherever you go and whatever you do, listen for the rustling of the Spirit to remind you that this group of people has loved you for a very long time, and that we believe God has a wild dream for you.

Edgewood, it is natural when we mark these milestones to get reflective. It's also natural to have it all make you feel kind of old. Weren't these three just in elementary school?

Might we remember just how old we are. As the Church, nearly two thousand years of the Spirit being poured out on followers of Christ. As the people of God, thousands more years of the push and pull of covenantal relationship with God. As creatures of the Spirit, billions of years of wind and flame moving stardust and creating holy havoc.

We are ancient, and yet, there are dreams and visions and prophecies ahead. The Spirit continues to move, in a thousand languages among confused people with the boundless power of an untamable God. Look and listen.
Amen.