

“Duck Jump”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Acts 2:1-13

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Pentecost Sunday

The story of Pentecost is one of the bible stories we tell every single year, along with the birth of Jesus, the baptism of Jesus, Palm Sunday's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. But this story, with its violent wind and “divided tongues, as of fire” and its noise and its Medes and Elamites and the whole thing seeming to some like somebody broke into the liquor cabinet a little early, has never quite captured the artistic and cultural imagination like those other stories. We don't get Pentecost carols and famous Renaissance paintings and rock operas about the Phrygians and Pamphyliaans. We pay plenty attention to the Holy Spirit herself, but not the particulars of what happened that day.

So why do we tell this story? Why is it important?

This isn't the first time the Holy Spirit shows up in scripture. We could spend hours perusing the Spirit's work in the Hebrew Scriptures. And then the Gospel of Luke, written by the same author as Acts, gives us a very active Spirit, from the very start, with the birth of John the Baptist and the angel's message to Mary. Pentecost wasn't the introduction to the Holy Spirit. So why do we need this story?

Imagine if we celebrated Christmas, but there was no account of Jesus's life that followed: no record of his preaching, no report of a miracle or a sign or an intervention on behalf of a vulnerable person. Without his life, Christmas doesn't make sense. It's just a sweet tale of a holy birth that has no connection to us.

Imagine the life of Christ without death and resurrection. What if he had lived to a ripe old age and died peacefully in his sleep and that was the end of the story? Then he would be a great moral philosopher, a revered rabbi, a prophet — but without resisting the empire, without turning the world upside-down, without a confounding empty tomb, we would all be home in our pajamas at 9:30 on Sunday morning.

Imagine the group of disciples and followers of Christ gathered in a house for the festival of Shavuot, celebrating the wheat harvest, seven weeks after the Passover. And in the cosmopolitan city of Jerusalem, there were Jews from all over the known world. Judaism had become an international, multi-cultural religion after the kingdoms of Judah and Israel were conquered centuries earlier. The people of the covenant were scattered like seeds, a vast diaspora of faithful followers of the God of Abraham and Isaac. Over the generations, they became Romans and Libyans and Cretans and Arabs — but always, Jewish. Imagine the people in the city with all their languages and imagine the Christ followers in their house and imagine that...nothing happened.

Certainly, God would have remained in relationship with the world. Certainly, the Spirit would have continued to surprise and to speak and to create. Certainly, the story of who Jesus was and what happened to those who knew him would have been told. I am certain that God would have found another way, but we tell *this* account because this bizarre scene changed everything. In this weird story, the church was born, the gospel was liberated, and the radical, inclusive life in Christ was made public.

No longer could this good news of incarnation and peace and healing and grace be kept quiet. No longer could the work of the Spirit be confined to seers and prophets and kings and heroes of scripture. God's people got a kick in the pants. The Spirit is wild and loud and fiery and on this day we discover that there is no room for a parochial faith or a private church. The Spirit of God will not be contained and the good news of Christ will not be an interesting narrative to be told, but a heart-bursting testimony to be lived.

The Holy Spirit is described as wind and fire and depicted as a dove and called a wild goose. Somehow this week, these names led me down one of those internet mazes that end in adorable animal videos. Specifically, I found myself watching a PBS nature clip about hooded merganser ducklings.¹ It started with the final egg of the clutch hatching in a mother's nest inside a tree cavity. With about ten little ducklings and their mom, things got noisy pretty quickly as the newborns learned their mother's voice and all the squeaking built a family bond.

Within a few hours of that last duckling hatching, mom flew up to the hole in the tree and soared out, leaving the fluffy little ones home alone. But mom didn't go far. She flew down to the ground and called for them. Knowing her voice, they were enticed to leave the nest. Except they couldn't fly up to the entrance, so with special claws just for this purpose, they started awkwardly climbing the inside of the tree. The first few tries were adorably unsuccessful, as little ducklings lost their grip and tumbled down onto their siblings in a downy duckling pile. Eventually, a few made it to the top, and whatever the duck word is for "Yikes!" came out of their tiny beaks. Mom had put her nest fifty feet up in the air! How exactly were these ducklings supposed to get down to the ground?

Mama duck knew that her ducklings were not made to live in a tree. They had a life to live outside that nest. And so she called to them, urging them to leave the only place they had ever...been! Responding to their mother's voice, the first wee ducklings did something that was absolutely bonkers — they jumped! They ricocheted off a twig or two on the long drop and landed hilariously on piles of leaves on the ground, bouncing and twisting and somersaulting like kids on a trampoline. A few of the ducklings were a bit cautious to take the plunge, but their siblings simply pushed them. Soon the entire family had left the nest and done the scary thing and gone where mom was leading them.

Parthians and Mesopotamians and Cappadocians are amazed and astonished and perplexed at what they hear, and it is crucial to be clear about how this language thing worked.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDJw43BJtCE&feature=youtu.be>

Science fiction always has to solve the problem of how intelligent creatures from the far reaches of the universe — not just the Roman Empire — will be able to communicate with each other. *Doctor Who* has the TARDIS automatically translating languages and using a telepathic field to allow the crew to understand. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* has a "babel fish" that you put in your ear canal and it feeds on the sounds that come in and excretes a translation into your brain. *Star Trek* has universal translators which are eventually built into the communicator pins that crew members use to ask to be beamed up. The less said about the languages in *Star Wars* beyond "Galactic Basic," the better.

God uses only the technology of the Holy Spirit to amaze this crowd. They are not suddenly speaking a uniform language. The differences and diversity are not erased. A miracle of unity occurs as each hears about God's deeds of power. But that's unity, not uniformity. This message is brought to all, where they are, in their own culture and context. It is the bearers of the news who are given the power to speak new languages. I know that this is one of the things we're really good at here at Edgewood, but let's remember this when that next visitor finds their way into our pews: the good news transcends our language and any desire we might have to make a new person change to be more like us. One of the glorious gifts of this community is that you speak with a family bond while maintaining your particular, peculiar, identities.

We tell this story because it recounts the Spirit bursting beyond a small group of Aramaic speaking Galileans and proclaiming loud and clear that this message is for all. The Spirit makes it unambiguously clear that it's time to leave the nest. There is a life of faith to be lived, and it requires dream casting and big vision and looking to the margins for those who haven't heard that they're beloved. You can't do that looking in the mirror, worrying about what people will think of you. You can't proclaim the gospel if you're navel-gazing. The Spirit pulls us out into the life we were made for — a life of following Christ that requires a giant leap of faith.

We tell this Spirit story and we discover that it's not just a curious thing that happened long ago. This story is not nostalgic. It's not a "Once upon a time..." thing. That Holy Spirit has been moving from the start of things and she wasn't about to stop at the end of the book of Acts.

This call-you-out-of-the-nest Spirit, this all-must-hear-the-news Spirit, this every-language-expresses-the-love-of-God Spirit is wind and fire and dove and wild goose this very minute. The Spirit honks at us when we value some lives over others: Israeli and Palestinian lives, Christian and Muslim lives, white and black lives, straight and LGBTQ lives. The Spirit blows the napkins off the table and rattles the chandelier when we try to stay in our comfortable house, afraid to tell those beyond these walls that we are amazed and astonished and perplexed and bewildered by what we have found in the grace and compassion and humility of a community of beloved disciples who spend their time using their faith to seek understanding.

This story is for the church of every age, to remind us that God is both gentle and restless, prepared to give us goosebumps and inspire us and to push and pull us out of complacency. When we become convinced that nothing can amaze us, the Spirit rushes in with things we can't explain, causing scenes

and spraying some color around. We find the Spirit in a moment of tear-filled wonder at the love that has surrounded us in our struggle and in the stunning, over-the-top beauty of creation and we whisper, “I don’t understand, but I get it.” And when we have tried to keep the gospel to ourselves and those who look like us or agree with us, the Spirit blows the doors off the joint and sends a spiritual invitation to a perfectly-chosen disruptor of our status quo and charges us with speaking a new tongue.

Thanks be to God for pushes and pulls and cannonball jumps from dizzying heights and unity that has no time for uniformity and the intricacies of language and for the ability to be astonished and perplexed and for leading, but never going so far that we can’t hear the sounds that say “family” and “home” and “beloved.” We are the people of God. The Spirit will not abandon us, and the Spirit will not let us be. Amen.

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