

“...when someone asks you if you’re a god, you say YES!”

A sermon by Zachary Helton based on Acts 2:1-21.
Preached on Pentecost Sunday, May 20th, 2018,
to Lake Shore Baptist Church.

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they all met in one room. Suddenly they heard what sounded like a violent, rushing wind from heaven; the noise filled the entire house in which they were sitting. Something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each one. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as she enabled them.

Now there were devout people living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled. But they were bewildered to hear their native languages being spoken. They were amazed and astonished: “Surely all of these people speaking are Galileans! How does it happen that each of us hears these words in our native tongue? We are Parthians, Medes and Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya around Cyrene as well as visitors from Rome - all Jews or converts to Judaism - Cretans and Arabs, too; we hear them preaching, each in our own language, about the marvels of God!”

All were amazed and disturbed. They asked each other, “What does this mean?” But other said mockingly, “They’re drunk on too much new wine.”

Then Peter stood up with the eleven and addressed the crowd: “Women and men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem! Listen to what I have to say! These people are not drunk as you think - it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! No, it’s what Joel the prophet spoke of:

‘In the days to come -

it is our God who speaks -

I will pour out my Spirit

on all humankind.

Your daughters and sons will prophesy,

your young people will see visions,

and your elders will dream dreams.

Even on the most insignificant of my people,

both women and men,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy.

And I will display wonders

in the heavens above

and signs on the earth below:

blood, fire and billowing smoke.

The sun will be turned into darkness

and the moon will become blood

before the coming of

the great and sublime day of our God.

And all who call upon the name of our God will be saved.’”

Sermon

This week, one of our youth walked into the sanctuary with a friend I'd never met. They were looking for an air conditioning break on a long walk. I was up here at the front untangling this Holy Spirit bird mass, and after a couple of minutes of introducing ourselves, this teenager gestured around the sanctuary and asked me what we do here? "Church stuff," our youth said, which I think pretty much settled it. Untangling a mass of red paper birds, you know, that's your standard church stuff. I thought there might be a better way to answer that, so I told him that we do lots of things, but one of those things we do was meeting once a week to tell stories that could help us be more loving, peaceful, and courageous people. "The birds," I explained, "are a way of getting into the story we're going to tell this week." Then I asked him to help me untangle, which lasted, like, two minutes until they decided they'd really prefer the 95 degree heat.

So fast forward a few days, and here we are, just like I said, in our meeting, telling our story. What is left is to ask the question: How does this story make us more loving, peaceful, and courageous people? So here's what I'd like to suggest as an answer. I think this story, the story of a fiery Spirit being embraced by common folks and the new world that follows, this story gives us eyes to see that every person on this planet is a beautiful, nuanced, and confusing concoction of flesh and spirit, bone and breath, ashes and life, dust and Divine. I think that this story gives us eyes to see that when we look at the great community of humankind, the flow of life, love, and peace that moves through all who would open themselves to receive it, we see the face of God. St. Athanasius once wrote that "God became human, that humans might become God." Now, if you're paying attention, St. Athanasius just called you, the person in the seat next to you, your mother in law, and that one guy from work God, and if that doesn't make you squirm, I don't think you're paying attention. Maybe a few, good stories will help us clarify what we're talking about when we put out an outrageous claim such as: "humans might become God."

There was once a man who made his living washing dishes. This man worked himself to the bone washing dishes in the steamy, rank kitchen of a restaurant. He served men and women all day and would go home smelling of old dish towels and detergent. One day, washing dishes, he was met by a genie who offered to grant him three wishes. First, the man wished for a better job, and before he knew it, he was standing in the corner office of a high-rise with people tripping over themselves to follow his orders. Realizing he could go higher, he then wished for greater power, he wished to be a king. Before he knew it he was sitting on a golden throne with the world under his feet, but still, he knew he could go higher. So with his final wish, he ordered the genie to make him God. "As you wish," the genie said obediently, and before he knew it, the man was back in the steam of the old kitchen, a dirty dish in his hand. Perhaps the first step on this journey is recognizing that to share God's nature doesn't look like Bruce Almighty as much as it looks like Jesus of Nazareth. Not like a King so much as a dishwasher. Not like an Emperor so much as a farmer, and that brings us to the story of Joel.

Joel was a fiery tongued Hebrew prophet, and some 2,400 years ago, he found himself standing in the midst of a dark and anxious assembly. Gazing around the room, he looked into the tired eyes of the farmers surrounding him. These tired eyes had watched helplessly as their crops and livelihoods withered and vanished under swarms of invading locusts, or maybe it was under the army of the Empire, either way the results were the same. He looked into the despairing eyes of children, like many of our high-schoolers today, learning for the first time that their safety was not guaranteed, uncertain if there could be a tomorrow and what they had done to deserve such a punishment. Joel stood in the midst of the dull, throbbing communal pain, knowing he must do a prophet's work. It seemed that he alone had words to name the agents of injustice. It seemed that he alone had eyes to see beyond the pain, to see the stories of redemption waiting for those who would help tell it. It seemed that he alone had a heart to feel the ever present hope of greater meaning in it all. So, wielding his carefully sharpened words like a surgeon, he cut open a window into a world in which they could abide, one in

which the Loving heart of the universe cared about their loss, and one in which their suffering might be made into a path to learn to see with the honest eyes of a prophet.

“Even now,” Joel spoke on behalf of the open armed God, “return to me with all of your heart, with fasting, with weeping, with mourning; in your grief, tear your hearts, not just your clothes. And when you get to that place, you will be repaid for the life that the locusts have stolen from you. There, I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind; your daughters and sons will speak the healing words of a prophet, your elders will have the dreams of a prophet, your young people will see visions of a new world. Regardless of class, wealth, race, gender, or age, all will be bearers of the Spirit and agents of God’s new Reign. Even when the world is falling apart, you will find salvation when you open yourself to God’s Spirit.”

And how the disheveled and dejected crowds must’ve scoffed. They were neither priests, prophets, nor kings. How could it be that resting beneath the crust of dirt on their skin was a pure Spirit of love, of peace, waiting to be embraced and released on a world waiting to be re-created, waiting to be loved into being? Could such a marriage of human and Divine be possible? And that brings us to the story of Jesus.

Hundreds of years after Joel, Jesus walked the streets of Jerusalem. With every step, he answered that question, and every answer brought him closer to execution at the hands of an offended religion and dominating Empire. The story of Jesus is the story of a human becoming so transparent to God’s Spirit, receiving it and abandoning himself to it so completely, that all anyone could see when they looked at him was God. The Spirit of God dwelled more fully in him than she ever could in any temple made of stone or any church building made of brick. In that ancient temple, where the old men thought they could store God and come get him when they needed him, there was a thick curtain separating the presence of God from everyone on the outside. On the dark day when Jesus was murdered, the story goes that the curtain was shredded from top to bottom, and as the scared little priests dared to look in, they found that the Spirit of God was not where they thought they had left her. This is dangerous, they thought,

because if she's not in there where we can manage her... where is she? And that brings us to the story of Pentecost.

Fifty days later, their answer came, violent and hot, raining down on a crowd of women and men not so different from those to whom Joel had preached to so many years earlier. The tongues of fire gave them tongues of fire as they started preaching about God's Reign in every language.

Once, when I was just starting out at Truett, I went to a breakfast to meet some of the professors. I ended up at a table with a professor of Hebrew Scriptures, who also teaches Hebrew, and who may or may not be a member here. "So what do you teach?" I asked, making small talk. "Hebrew," he said, "because God speaks Hebrew, but humanity is sinful, so the New Testament is written in Greek." He clearly hadn't read the Pentecost story in a while.

The Spirit, it seems, transcends language. She speaks in Hebrew, English, story, melody, intellect, feeling, and imagination. And she spoke that day. That day, those women and men became so transparent to God's Spirit, that all the crowds saw when they looked at them was God. God had become human, that humans might become God. And as everybody was looking around, confused, trying to figure out what just happened, Peter cleared his throat to explain. He reached back four hundred years and borrowed the words of the prophet Joel, just as fresh in that moment as they were then as they are now. And that brings us to the story of you and me.

This story points us towards the reality that the Spirit of love, of joy, of peace, of patience, of kindness, of goodness, of faithfulness, of gentleness, of self-control, is residing in your very being at this very moment. It is like the blue sky, obscured by clouds. Whether they're storm clouds or fluffy white clouds, just because they cover the spaciousness of a blue sky doesn't mean the sky is not there. In Jesus, we see how the clouds can become thin, how the light can break through them, and in Pentecost we see that the same Spirit is ever present in us, waiting for us to allow her to come through. But whether as a blue sky, a divine breath, a gentle dove,

or a roaring fire, she is in you, finding new expression through your face and your hands. She is waiting to remind you that you are connected, loved, and loving, and through that love she will re-create the world. She is in your neighbor, and even beneath the most distressing disguises of the poor, the suffering, and the enemy, waiting to be recognized and worshipped. So may this story do its work. May it cast its spell. God has become human. Now may humanity become God. Happy Pentecost.