



Has the Spirit Gone Missing?

Sunday, June 5, 2022

Pentecost Sunday

The Reverend Megan Berry

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

If we haven't beaten you over the head with this information yet, big news, today is Pentecost! As we heard in our scripture passage, today is the day when the Holy Spirit first descended upon the earliest disciples and apostles, coming down in a rush of violent wind, and giving them the ability to talk and listen to one another (even amongst those who spoke different languages). This story is big, fun, and full of amazing imagery to draw upon.

As I spent time with this story, reading it, questioning it, looking to commentaries for the historical facts of this passage that I don't know or don't remember, I kept coming back to this question (or a variation of this question) "has the Spirit gone missing"?

Upon an initial read of the passage, one might think "oh everyone here already speaks a similar language and probably believes similar ideas about the world and God." Which makes sense because our passage starts off saying "they were all together in one place"? But as we read further and read with a closer eye to the details, we find out that this "one place" is actually all of Jerusalem with Jewish people from all of the surrounding areas: Parthians, Cappadocia, Mesopotamia, and Asia, just to name a few. They each have their own understanding of their faith and their own native language (Greek, Aramaic, Latin, etc.) that they navigate the world through. It would be similar to thinking "oh the one place is First Presbyterian Church, Ann Arbor," but it was actually ALL of the Presbyterian churches around the world.

So they've all traveled to Jerusalem, it's pretty early in the morning, and suddenly this great big wind rushes through with fiery tongues and touches each of them and then they're able to listen and understand one another, despite speaking in their native language.

And what sticks out to me and makes me wonder if the Spirit has truly gone missing these days is the inability of people to listen to those who are different from them AND understand them. How many of us truly listen AND seek to understand people these days?

As I look around the world at all the terror and violence that is happening, at all the injustices not only around the world but right here in Ann Arbor, MI, I'm left wondering "are we actually listening to one another?" And if we are listening, are we willing to understand one another?

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation. Copyright ©2022. All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

Over the past several weeks there have been countless acts of hate and gun violence perpetrated on communities. Just this week alone I have seen articles about two hospital shootings: one in Tulsa, OK, one in Dayton, OH; a shooting at a Walmart in Pittston, PA; and yet another school shooting, this time in Los Angeles, CA. Alongside these articles on social media are various memes and images that people are posting, some promoting various forms of gun control, others promoting DIY solutions for teachers, employees, and others to use to protect themselves from the next inevitable tragedy. On every post, I have read hate-filled comment wars with folks on all sides of the issue screaming in all caps and using hurtful language, not only trying to get their point across but attempting to demean the other person at the same time. It's a lot to take in...

As I've been reading these comments and memes, I keep coming back to a song in my favorite musical *tick... tick... BOOM!* For those who don't know this musical, it chronicles the life of Jonathan Larson who is the renowned writer and composer of the famous musical *Rent*. While the main focus of the musical is about Jonathan writing and attempting to produce his musical, it also focuses on Jonathan's thoughts and worries about the AIDS crisis of the 80s and 90s. The song I think of is called "Louder than Words," and it's the closing song of the musical. Even though Jonathan Larson wrote these lyrics with the AIDS crisis in mind, they are still fitting today for the many crises we face. He writes...

"How can we see the dismay and keep from fighting?"

"Why does it take an accident before the truth gets through to us?"

"If we don't wake up and shake up the nation, we'll eat the dust of the world wondering why..."

While these questions are powerful ones, and ones that we should continue to ponder this week, the chorus of his song, the crux that all of this hinges on, is the phrase "actions speak louder than words." This is written over and over, often sung between the questions above and others. Actions speak louder than words... So what actions should we take? Is there one singular right answer?

Let's look at all of the responses to gun violence I've seen this week amongst my social media spaces. One person posted a DIY safety feature for teachers to install in their classrooms, a special latch that keeps the door shut even if someone tries to open it. Another person posted about the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship event about turning guns into gardening tools. Another posted about several different ways to make your vote count at elections and how voting will fix all of this. Others have posted several takes on "thoughts and prayers" vs "policy and change".

So what do we do with these varied responses? Is there a correct one? Is the Spirit's help with understanding supposed to lead us to one right answer?

If we look at our first scripture reading, it is the classic story that many of you probably know as the Tower of Babel. In this text, the people are unified and, out of fear of being separated and different, decide to band together to build this great tower that will reach into the heavens. God sees what is happening and comes down and stops the building and scatters them around the world creating different nations and languages.

Has the Spirit Gone Missing?

Sunday, June 5, 2022
Pentecost Sunday
The Reverend Megan Berry

Now, you may be wondering, “Megan, how is this applicable to Pentecost?” This scripture clearly shows that God was punishing them by scattering them and creating diverse nations and languages, which is then fixed when the Spirit comes and we can all understand one another. And that is one way scholars have explored these texts especially when put together like in today’s lectionary.

But I want us to think about this text in a slightly different way. What if God was granting them a gift instead of punishing them? One scholar, Cameron Howard writes, “In the Babel account, fear is the binding agent that drives the building projects: fear of dispersal, of loss, of living with otherness. Both the Babel and Pentecost accounts emphasize the power of human unity, without expecting human sameness, sending people out into the world to forge connections with those who are different themselves.”

So what if we think about the Tower of Babel, not as a story of punishment but rather a gift to all of humanity to experience and excel in all of our unique and diverse ways? As a result of that gift, we have all of these valid and diverse ways of responding to our lives even amidst tragedy. You don’t have to be locked into responding to something one way simply because “that’s what this one group says and therefore that’s the only option”. You are gifted the freedom to respond in all of these different ways AND gifted the Spirit to help us listen to and understand one another.

So, to come back around to my question at the beginning, I don’t know if the Spirit has gone missing. What I do know is there is a lot that I don’t understand right now, yet I can feel that voice inside of me, moving me to talk with people, to take action, to try to understand and maybe make a difference. Maybe that’s where the Spirit has been all along? After all, actions speak louder than words... Amen.