

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Day of Pentecost  
May 27, 2007

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“Ever-reaching”  
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The news reports did not lead off this morning with a report on how many folks attended worship of one kind or another this weekend. They also didn't mention the people who took care of family members and friends last week, unable to take care of themselves. No reference to the many others in helping or caring professions who reached out to those in their charge with tenderness, kindness, and love. No highlights of parents and guardians and their daily important work, no reports about the children who, finding a bird with its wing injured, carried the suffering creature home, with a soulful pleading look in their eyes, somehow hoping the adults in their lives could make it well, as adults often do.

These and countless other acts of human and spiritual kindness and care were not brought to the attention of the public in the way the “news” is propelled toward us.

What we did hear about were the tragedies of human interactions gone awry, from individual acts of violence to nations at war. We heard about the shortcomings and failings of the rich and famous and the not so famous, caught in the cross-fire of fear and service revolvers.

I will not review the news from which I am trying to distance myself a bit this morning – by reviewing it, but if someone from a far away place who knew nothing about us arrived on our shores and was greeted only with the news as distributed through the media, chances are they would get back on the boat, plane, or train that brought them here and never return.

It almost seems that we mark our lives, like prehistoric folks did in the caves, living from one “special report” to the next. – or we do our best to distance ourselves completely until it is impossible to ignore what is in our faces.

How many of us can readily describe where we were when JFK, Martin, and Bobby were shot? Who cannot remember that fatal flight of the space shuttle, the first and ultimate attack on the World Trade Center, the beating and death of Matthew Shephard, the graphic footage of the beginning of the Iraq War? And the more that marks the time and lifetime we have had here on this planet.

Fortunately, there is a softer and gentler background to our lives, backgrounds with the fonder memories and events we share and hold in our hearts. Sometimes it's hard to remember those things that are close to our hearts, when the world is spinning out of control and every urge in our bodies seem to want to grab it and stop it. As limited as it may seem, the truth is that we stop it from spinning by drawing more closely to those nearest us, demonstrating the changes we would love to see the broader world make. For many of us, that includes drawing more closely toward the loving God we know, trusting that all things will somehow be made new and whole, when the time comes -- a reliance upon God's grace and promise to somehow make it through.

On this Memorial Day weekend, I am thinking – probably like you – of the men and women who have served and are today serving our nation. I am thinking about the families who are living on the brink of the news, each and every day, as sons and daughters, spouses and love-ones and friends wage war. There seems to be no escaping it. Today's news is blaring statistics for May. As one reporter put it, "With five days left to go in the month, May has already been one of the most deadly of months for American Troops in Iraq, with 100 lives lost so far this month.

I can only imagine what it is like for families trying to move through each day of this horror -- as if in some surreal existence, wondering if it is ok to laugh or cry, get up or stay in bed, rail against or support the government, pray or maybe curse the god who ever taught us to fight.

There are no answers that I have for these things. Other than to be here and present in the world that I have been given to touch.

Yet, seeking answers for such things is an ongoing theme of our lives, and we are certainly no different from those of whom the Bible describes. From this morning's readings, Genesis is all about finding explanations and answers in an emerging civilization. Compiled and written long after most of the events it describes –in many ways it is a document that attempts to seek answers to the world around it and to understand how things happened. It also attempts to use previous events as instructions for the future – as in the case of this morning's reading – a warning for what the future might hold based on past events and behavior of the peoples.

Most historians would agree that there really was no "tower of Babel." In fact, the tower that is at the heart of the lesson is most likely an unfinished or worn out ziggurat, constructed by the Babylonians, and used by Palestinian nomads as an explanation for the phenomenon of the many different languages of many nations. The words Babel and balal (which means to confuse) – were themselves confused and, it is thought, a myth was born to explain these differences as the acts of a wrathful god, punishing the arrogant for their pride.

It is a continuation of other stories with similar themes that are repeated over and over again in the Bible. The authors were creating a system of history to establish and maintain some kind of rule with an authority to bring others into faithfulness or compliance – and to be used as a tool of oppression, when needed.

It helps to unfold scriptures in this way a bit, especially when we are faced with another one of those readings that presents a wrathful, vengeful, toying god – in the company of other gods – note the plural references, “Come let us go down and confuse their language...” The understanding of the mythic qualities of such narratives helps to uncover the reality of the times, making it a little easier – maybe – to identify with the need to understand, find answers, become – enlightened. We also understand what happens when a select few gain that power. History is full of stories of dominance based on such limited or restricted enlightenment used unjustly.

Jesus was at that intersection of abusive power, as much as the arms of the cross intersected beneath his hanged body. The events that followed his crucifixion and resurrection, including Pentecost as described, were stories meant to further establish the foundation of an emerging church. A church, in this reading of Acts, that reinforces the power of the Spirit in our lives and in all of creation, regardless of any boundaries. Instead of a cacophony of semantics and syntax to confuse, here was the Spirit for which language or anything else could impede. Simply God knows God’s creation and in turn creation at that level knows its Creator. On this day of Pentecost – creation and God spoke in one voice. And this all out of the Jewish tradition of celebration and observance.

Pentecost has its roots in the Shavu’ot, or the Jewish celebration of *Festival of the Weeks*. Online website Judaism 101 says this about the Festival of the Weeks:

It is the second of the three major festivals with historical and agricultural significance (the other two are [Passover](#) and [Sukkot](#)). Agriculturally, it commemorates the time when the first fruits were harvested and brought to the [Temple](#), and is known as Hag ha-Bikkurim (the Festival of the First Fruits). Historically, it celebrates the giving of the [Torah](#) at Mount Sinai, and is also known as Hag Matan Torateinu (the Festival of the Giving of Our Torah).

The period from Passover to Shavu’ot is a time of great anticipation. We count each of the days from the second day of Passover to the day before Shavu’ot, 49 days or 7 full weeks, hence the name of the festival. The counting reminds us of the important connection between Passover and Shavu’ot: Passover freed us physically from bondage, but the giving of the Torah on Shavu’ot redeemed us spiritually from our bondage to idolatry and immorality. Shavu’ot is also known as Pentecost, because it falls on the 50th day.

I think there is significance in the idea of the giving of the Torah – the Hag Matan Torateinu and the giving of tongues to the disciples. Neither presupposed that all the information that is needed for life and living is magically transferred in either the document or the ecstatic experience of glossolalia (speaking in tongues, which is most likely what was described in Acts. But instead, each celebration – one perhaps born out of the other – each celebration presupposed that the receiving of Torah or of the Spirit is ongoing, far from static, far from finished with us. The giving is done, the receiving continues.

And, therein, for me, lies the hope of this day and these times.

As I sat on the beach yesterday, far enough away from networks so that neither my phone nor my computer worked – I felt myself, well, disconnected. Then the thought occurred to me that maybe I am relying a little too much or too easily on the wrong networks. Truth is that on that beach, however far I might be from the technology that we rely on each day, far removed from that – I was still connected to the network of the Spirit, against which all this life – generations before and to come – would unfold. All I had to do was listen, look, and be still to know I was far from isolated or alone.

I get that confused sometimes with convenience and the ability to communicate easily across boundaries using our phones, computers, and internets. Technology, that tool we use, is nothing compared to the ultimate change in our lives that will only come when we open to the Spirit in ways that turn us from our own pride and ego, our own arrogance and certainty. For a world to do that, it will take more than books or flames. But one thing is clear to me, it starts with us, right here, each day – with the lives we have with one another and the news that is never reported.

This Day of Pentecost coinciding with Memorial Day Weekend (and all the history that precedes these events) – is a reminder for me of how our prayers and life within the Spirit is the real news, the Good News preached and taught by Jesus. I never seem far from the thought that Jesus was in the midst of a first century Palestine that was every bit as warring and oppressive as these days of ours may be, yet he was not distracted from the work to which he was called; he was not discouraged; he did not give up. In fact, he saw what he was doing as the solution.

For me, we continue to reach, ever-reaching for ways to be open to and used by the Spirit. That's the biggest news I can think of sharing. We are alive in the Spirit and anything in that place is possible. If we pay attention to that, maybe the Memorial Day of some future time will be in remembrance of something no one has had to do for generations; maybe Pentecost will be a day of celebrating the inclusive tide of the Spirit over that of pride and human arrogance.

That would, indeed, be Good News, don't you think? Amen.