**An Unpredictable Spirit**

Psalm 104:24-35b

Acts 2:1-21

If I were in some sort of legal trouble, I seriously doubt I would want Peter as my defense attorney. I can hear him now, “men and women of the jury, my client is innocent. He couldn’t possibly have pilfered money from the church offering plate. The counters take the money right after church and then give it to Karen Shatek who puts it in a bag and takes it right to the bank. If you were a juror you might be thinking to yourself, maybe he is innocent, but sounds to me like the only thing keeping that pastor from new Prius are those counters and Karen Shatek

I am guessing the disciples would have preferred to be represented in their defense by someone other than Peter as well. Although the disciples were followers of Jesus, they were also faithful Jews and so like other Jews, they were gathering to observe the traditional Jewish celebration of Pentecost. This is a day when both rural and city dwellers alike remember their connection to the earth, celebrating and giving thanks for the blessings of the spring harvest. Pentecost is also a time to recall the gift of the Ten Commandments and to renew the Covenant of being God’s people. The problem is that for the disciples, the celebration seems to have gotten out of hand. They are starting to attract attention. One after the other people on the street are beginning to ask “What in the world is going on over there?”

Before you know it a crowd is gathering. Who can blame them? A fire truck comes rolling down your street, the first thing you do is look outside to see where it is headed. A crowd begins gathering on the corner, looking in the direction where smoke seems to be coming from someone’s house. We are inquisitive. We want to know what is going on.

The crowds gathering outside the house where the disciples are celebrating Pentecost are extremely curious. To make matters even more perplexing, this is an exceptionally diverse crowd of people and each one of them is hearing at least one of the disciples speaking in their native tongue, “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Egyptians, Libians”… all are hearing a language they recognize. Folks are naturally looking for an explanation, and so some draw what seems to them the obvious conclusion, “they have had too much to drink.”

This is where Peter’s legal arguments in defense of the disciples comes up a bit short. “Men (and women) of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem,…Indeed they are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.” You don’t have to be in the crowd outside the house where the disciples are gathered to see the weakness in Peter’s argument. So, basically what you’re saying Peter is that because it is 9 a.m. we should look for another explanation, but if it were a little later in the day, it might be a very different story for the followers of Jesus. Like I said, I am not sure I would want Peter as my defense attorney.

This does, of course, raise a question for the church today. Is it a good thing if people outside of the church see us as a largely stable, traditional, predictable, sober group of people? Or would it be a mark of our faithfulness if now and then people began to ask, what in the world is going on over there? What is up with those people and their unusual behavior?

What would make people ask those types of questions? Predictability and stability are commonly seen as a good thing if you are content with the way things are. I am glad I am married to a person who feels no need to rearrange our household furniture every six months or so. I know that works for some people, but I like coming home and sitting in the same place that I sat the night before. The fact that I have been in one church virtually my entire ministry, says something about my own appreciation for stability in my life and the life of my family.

The Roman Empire, which hovers like a cloud over the life of Jesus and the beginnings of the early church, also prefers stability. They believe that stability means they are firmly in control, which is why crosses, like the lynching tree in our U.S. history, were used to remind people who is in charge. A person hanging strategically from a cross, or someone prominently hung from a lynching tree, is all one needs to keep people fearful and maintain stability and order.

Stability, predictability are often valued, but they also can stand in the way of what is loving, what is just, what is compassionate. There are plenty of people in Minnesota who a few years ago were looking for stability and predictability when it came to Minnesota State law on marriage. They were so committed to this stability that they sought to put into our state constitution a definition of marriage that would have forever excluded LGBT residents from this legal recognition of their relationships. Now, of course, things have changed, and they continue to change. Yesterday Ireland became the first country to have a popular vote in favor of same sex marriage.

But, there are still many Christian, who wonder what is up with congregations like ours and others who advocated for and celebrate these changes. Tradition is invoked; the stability of families and heterosexual marriages is seen as threatened

Fortunately for the disciples and fortunately for us, Peter does improve his legal argument when he begins to quote the prophet Joel, who proclaiming the word of God says, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my spirit.” It is the Spirit of God that turns Peter’s stumbling defense of the early Christians into a powerful witness about how God is at work.

For followers of Jesus, the one thing that we are never really guaranteed is stability and predictability. On the contrary what the gathered disciples encounter is the unpredictable spirit of God at work. The same spirit that hovered over creation at the beginning of time, the same spirit that gave voice to the Hebrew prophets, the same spirit that descends on Jesus at his baptism, is still on the loose, stirring things up, causing a commotion, empowering us to become part of God’s new creation. The potential for change is always there. This is what it means to be the church.

No one wants to be thought of as the type of people who might go off the deep end. We all value stability and predictability. Isn’t that a nice church over there? They have been around for a long time. They are very friendly and never cause any problems. We all like folks to speak positively about us. But, it is also a sign of our faithfulness if now and then; neighbors began to ask, what is up with people in that church over at the corner of Baker St. and Manomin? What are they so excited about? What are they so enthused about? It’s not even 11 a.m. What is going on at that church? When the spirit of God is at work, there is no telling what might happen.

**Psalm 104:24-35b**

*The Psalmist never doubts that creation itself is filled with the presence and spirit of God. God is the source of all life. Nothing exists without the breath and presence of God. Every aspect of creation reflects God’s glory. All of this is expressed by the Psalmist in our reading today. The Psalmist also knows that God’s creation can be violated by those who remain indifferent and so calls upon God to bring justice to the earth by cleansing creation of all wrong doing.*

O God, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, It is teeming with countless creatures, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it. These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them,  they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. May the glory of God endure forever; may God rejoice in God's works—God looks on the earth  and it trembles, God touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to God  as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God  while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to God, for I rejoice in God. Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless God, O my soul. Praise be to God!

**Acts 2:1-21**

***Our second lesson offers a dramatic description of the disciples being filled with the spirit of God on the day of Pentecost, a day when Jews celebrate the gifts of the earth and renew their covenant with God. For some observers it is a sign that God is at work. For other observers it is merely confusing and indication that the disciples may have begun the celebration of Pentecost a little too early.***

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.  
  
Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."  
  
But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"