

On The Edge of Reason

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ Acts 2:1-13 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** 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. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” **13** But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” (Acts 2:1-13, NRSV)



I don’t know if you missed me, but I wasn’t here a few Sundays ago. That weekend Lena and I spent a few days with our children, their spouses and partners, and our grandchildren vacationing in Zion National Park. It was a great time in a beautiful place with incredible weather. I trust God will understand our taking one Sunday to spend time in a red rock cathedral instead of gathering with brothers and sisters in this place.

Those of you who know a bit about Zion know that it is a great place for hiking. And arguably, the signature hike at Zion National Park is a trek into the Narrows. The Narrows is the narrowest section of Zion Canyon. There the Virgin river flows through this canyon with walls a thousand feet tall and in places the river is just twenty to thirty feet wide.

I can show you pictures and tell you how beautiful it is. I can explain to you what it is like to hike 4 miles up the river as you fight the current. I can give you a sense of

what it is like to see the remnants of flash floods that regularly sweep through this area. I can communicate what it is like to walk on the slippery stones and rocks hidden under that water surface and pray that you don’t fall.

But my words can never give you a full sense of the experience. The images I show you will never put you in the waters there. No matter how compelling my description, you will never fully know the Narrows until you travel to Zion yourself. Until you put on your waterproof boots and pants, grab your own wooden walking stick, walk a few miles up the Virgin River and see the walls close in on you, you will never really know the Narrows. Until then, you can never be certain that what I am telling you is true.

The same can be said of the truth of today’s passage. We have all heard the story of Pentecost. There we see one hundred and twenty of Jesus followers gathered together on that day. The Hebrew word for this celebration is *Shavuot*, (the Feast of Weeks) and in that time Pentecost was a simply Jewish harvest festival offering first fruits to God. These Jewish Christians gathered that day knew that Jesus had died and were told he had been raised from the dead. Many probably even heard him teach for the forty days after his resurrection as he walked the earth in his resurrected body. Some even saw him ascend to the heavens and heard him tell them to wait in Jerusalem.

But none of them knew what would happen next. None really understood how this small band of Jesus’ followers would fare. None of them were certain of how God would continue to work now that Jesus was gone from the earth.

On that day when the events we read about happened, they were shocked by the rush of violent wind (“from heaven” — I’ve never noticed that before), they saw flames of fire hovering around each person gathered and spontaneously they all began to speak in a variety of known languages. We are told that the crowd who witnessed this was “amazed and astonished.”

Pentecost is the strangest of Christian holidays. While we in the church always do a magnificent job of capturing the glory and power of Christmas and Easter—in music and art—we are not so adept with Pentecost. One writer comments:

The history of art and imagination has left us a paltry legacy of depicting the narrative tumult of this story. Art history mainly leaves us with small, polite tongues of fire dancing through a room or resting as unobtrusively as possible (for fire) upon the heads of people calmly sitting in their places.¹

Pentecost seems so unreal, so beyond our experience, so irrational, that I have no idea how to communicate it to you. I love that we have red colors in the sanctuary (thanks to Barbara and her team), but maybe we would get closer to the actual experience if we built a big bonfire up and down the aisles set up huge fans on the chancel, and blasted foreign language music through the speakers. Maybe then someone walking down Florin Road would make their way to the sanctuary doors and take notice. Do you think?

Part of our problem with this passage and many stories in scripture is that we want them to teach us something to convince us of something. We want them to give us some kind of certainty about our faith.

But that is not what is going on here. Some of you know that the book of Acts is actually a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, a kind of Volume 2 of the writer's work. In the Gospel - Luke is telling us about the amazing work and teachings of Jesus. In Acts he tells us about the work of the Spirit. The whole of Acts is a fleshing out of chapter 1, verse 8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.²

You see, Acts is not about instruction, but about story. The writer Luke is not interested in teaching us how to follow rules or establish certainty but in having us enter the story—in having us join in the “dance of the Spirit.” Theologian and pastor William Willimon puts it this way:

Luke seems to believe that the truth is only available as narrative, always hidden from direct explanation or easy accessibility.³

In other words, the only way we get to the truth of what God is communicating here is not through study or developing a rational understanding but by opening to the presence of God our lives. We are invited to enter the mystery.

¹http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2457

² Acts 1:8, *NRSV*.

³ *Interpretation: Luke*, William Willimon, p. 29.

Think of it this way — I can tell you everything I know about the Narrows of Zion Canyon, but you will never know it until you step into the water. You can listen to a hundred sermons about the Holy Spirit, but you will never know the Spirit until you experience its disorienting power.

Let me put it simply—Christianity is not primarily a belief system, it is not a set of certainties. It is the practice of the presence of God. It is a way of life empowered by the Spirit. Christianity is not about certainty. It is not about fixed principles and absolutes

Let me be honest with you—I am not certain Jesus rose from the dead. I am not certain Jesus is savior. I am not certain the bible is true. I am not certain God will defend the poor. I am not certain God answers prayer. I am not certain there is life after death. I am not certain that the Spirit is active and alive in this world. I don't operate on certainty.

In fact, I believe certainty can be a destructive force in our world. Some people are certain one race is better than another. Some people are certain there are others who must be destroyed. Some people are certain they know the complete truth. Some people are certain who is saved and who is not. I can't be part of that.

Theologian Richard Rohr is a great comfort to me here:

People who've had any genuine spiritual experience always know that they don't know. They are utterly humbled before mystery. They are in awe before the abyss of it all, in wonder at eternity and depth, and a Love, which is incomprehensible to the mind.⁴

Now please pay careful attention. Don't misunderstand me. Though I may not be certain of the Spirit, I deeply trust the mystery that God offers to us. Though I may not be certain of the work and teaching of Jesus, I boldly confess my faith in him.

For you see, belief is not certainty. Certainty looks on from a distance, pretends like it really knows the truth, but refuses to risk entering the life of God. But Belief is trust. Belief is faith. It is praying for healing in the face of a world that offers only death. It is loving in a time that believes there is more power in hate. It is welcoming the invisible Holy Spirit in a culture that only trusts what can be seen and touched. That is what we see here in Acts 2, a story where God pours out the Holy Spirit on “every kind of people.”⁵

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/548085-people-who-ve-had-any-genuine-spiritual-experience-always-know-that>

⁵ Acts 2:17, *The Message*.

Acts 2 is sometimes referenced as the “birth of the church.” But if that is the case, this is not always the church I recognize. In all our buildings and budgets, in our carefully planned programs and classes, in our worship service and songs, in our mission trips and life groups, if we are supposed to resemble the Pentecost Church— I think we have we have missed something. We’ve missed getting into the current of the river. We have missed sharing in the dance of the Spirit.

We’ve spent a lot of time on being certain of what we believe about revelation and racism, about prayer and politics. We have spent more time trying to be certain about “you name the topic,” than we have on taking the risk of entering the life with God. We’ve spent more time trying to describe what faith is than we have joining in the work of God’s kingdom.

I think we’re afraid. I know I am. I find it much easier to live in the certainties of my head, than to follow where Jesus is calling me in my life. I would rather stay in intellectual affirmation than risk the confusion and irrationality of life with God.

Some of you know singer/songwriter Audrey Assad. She has been a well known voice on the contemporary Christian music landscape for almost a decade now. As she tells her story, she grew up in a rigid fundamentalist church. Her people knew what they believed - with unshakeable certainty. There she developed a deep and clear faith. Over the last number of years she found her way to Catholicism and into a deeper acknowledgement of the mystery present in the Christian faith.⁶

Her latest album includes a song called “Irrational Season” which wonderfully portrays both the appeal and challenge of mystery. Listen to the some of the lyrics:⁷

*Over the skyline to see the spheres
I lift my eyes to the heavens
Nothing sensible has yet appeared
In this irrational season...*

*All the way my savior leads me
To peace that’s past understanding;
Into the wilderness to find the streams
To know beyond comprehending*

*And the light is wilder here
Out on the edge of reason*

*And Love burns bright and clear
Out where I cannot seize Him*

I love her thoughts, “nothing sensible has yet appeared.” That seems like life to me. That seems right to me. Or this one, “And the light is wilder here, out on the edge of reason.” It makes me think of the wildness of that Pentecost day, the wild uncontrollable God. I especially like her concluding thought, “And Love burns bright and clear, out where I cannot seize Him.” You see we can never seize God, we can never control the Spirit, yet God’s light burns bring and clear.

That is the message of Acts 2—God is way out of our control, yet still chooses to empower us. Listen to what happened when those gathered let God take control:

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common...⁸

They were invited to enter the place where “light is wilder” and where God could not be “seized.” But where they would know God’s power. That’s what happened on that first Pentecost Day. And happens in our day as well.

Listen prayerfully now as Jenny sings this song for us...

⁶ <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.podbean.com/e/episode-47-audrey-assad-deconverting-from-certainty/>

⁷ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/audreyassad/irrationalseason.html>

⁸ Acts 2:41-44, *NRSV*.

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. What are you really certain of in this life? What allows you that certainty?
2. Read Acts 2:1-13 again. This is a familiar passage. What do you notice that you have missed before?
3. What is one experience that really helped you understand the Christian faith?
4. Verse 12 tells us that all were “amazed and perplexed.” Is there any aspect of your Christian faith that “amazes” or “perplexes” you?
5. While many of these followers of Jesus who were gathered that day knew about his death and resurrection (some had even seen him), this event marks such a dramatic change in their demeanor that it is often called the birthday of the church. What changed? (You may need to read a bit farther in the chapter.)
6. Verse 13 says that many of the onlookers to this scene thought the followers of Jesus were “filled with new wine.” What things does the church do today that might make others think we are a bit drunk or crazy?
7. Acts 2 talks about the Spirit coming with fire, wind, and many languages. Where do you see the Spirit today (in your life, the church, the world)? Is it as dramatic? Why or why not?
8. Is there a place in your life you have resisted listening to and responding to God because you are just not “certain?” What would happen if you just stepped into the flow of God’s work?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is the Holy Spirit?
How can we see it at work in this world?