



A-Pentecost, 2008
St. Luke's, Renton, WA
Kevin Pearson, Preacher

Spirit of Surprise

Welcome, again, to this great day in the life of the church. Pentecost is the day we commemorate the Holy Spirit's intervention in the lives of Jesus' disciples after his resurrection. The Holy Spirit is that "Advocate" Jesus promised his followers—the one who would be with them, who would come to walk along side them, blow through them, animate their psyches and souls with God's life. As in all feasts of the church, we commemorate—we call to mind together—an ancient memory so we may continue to live its enduring truth.

On Christmas, we remember the birth of Jesus in order to expect new birth in our lives. On Good Friday, we recall the death of Jesus so that we remember the death-dealing ways of the world that strangle us of our vitality. At Easter, we recall the resurrection of Jesus so that we know the eternal "Yes" of God that is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, of every story of our lives. And Pentecost ... Pentecost reminds us that God continues to be present to us, to the church. God remains ever-present, ever-available, always enlivening, shaping, healing, creating, gifting, holding, and freeing us. And, often, surprisingly so.

I know, I know. You'll take a double portion of ever-present and always-available, but you can pass on the surprise. As humans and groups of humans we tend not to like much surprise. We tend to be fairly risk-averse, preferring instead safety, stability, and sameness, equilibrium, and status quo. We might prefer that God were fixed and religion stayed the same. Well ... sorry, that's not the gift Pentecost bestowed. The Spirit of God blows where she wills and can be a mighty force to contend with should we be locked into our ways. Pentecost reminds us that life open to the Spirit is a walk on the wild side with the God of adventure. If we're going to get into the game with God, if Pentecost is going to be part of the story (and it is), then we had better expect the unexpected in our lives lived in faith.

Certainly the way I have carefully colored within the lines of life have been no match for the wily ways of the Spirit of God. I've mentioned before that I knew what I wanted to be when I was 13 years old. I was crystal clear. Nothing could have deterred me. I was a directed and determined youngster, earning and spending thousands of dollars toward my dream. But somehow that vision of knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was going to be an airline pilot ... somehow at about the age of about 20 that vision took a left hook and pressing on with equal ardor, I ended up a priest. Surprise. Life has been full of surprises that have shifted my vision and opened whole new worlds previously unimagined.

Perhaps you've seen or heard about the new film called "The Visitor." It's the story of a Connecticut economics professor named Walter Vale, a widower who has long fallen out of love with his life and his profession. He has taught the same class year after year without passion or interest. Walter gets strong-armed by his faculty chair to present a colleague's paper at a conference in New York. But when he drives into Manhattan, where he keeps an apartment, he discovers that someone has illegally rented out his place to two, so-called, illegal aliens—a Syrian drummer and his Senegalese girlfriend. Walter throws the couple out onto the street on a cold New York night, but seeing the honesty in their faces and recognizing their plight, he has a change of heart and invites them back in. Throughout the film we watch Walter change from his withdrawn life with no friends, family or emotional connection to anything, into a caring and passionate person. And much of it happens through his relationship with the Syrian musician



who teaches Walter how to play the Djembe—the African drum. Walter is transformed from his awkward movement and absence of rhythm to this great scene in an uptown park where he plays with abandon amidst a large host of drummers and dancers moving and grooving to the African beat. Walter comes alive to the rhythm, to humanity, to his own heart and the joy of being alive. It's a great Pentecost story.

Luke's story in the Acts of the Apostles tells of the Spirit landing upon the disciples, surprisingly transforming them and enabling them to speak to those gathered from different lands and tongues, across the barriers and boundaries of culture and language, about the power of God moving in their lives? Those who had traveled to Jerusalem as part of their pilgrimage on the Jewish feast of Weeks, each from their respective lands, got the message in their own native language.

Paul's story to the Corinthians is that there are many ways, many gifts for our common good and they are driven by one Spirit which is ever making us both particularly creative and united as one at the same time. Surprise! It's possible.

And John says that from those who thirst for and drink of the Spirit of God, Spirit like rivers of living water will flow from their hearts.

God's great surprise for the church, for you and for me, is to beckon us beyond the borders of our carefully conceived lives and make us new in the Spirit, make us One in the Spirit, make us whole in the Spirit, alive and vital people with the fire of God's love in our lives. God's Spirit transforms us, dramatically or little by little, to be people empowered with a message, with gifts for the common good. And by offering those gifts come from God—our passions, our lives—we come to life.

And today we come to celebrate that life: to sing, to dance, to live in the rhythm of life given to all. So bust at the seams, let yourself go, move to the groove of God who is giving you life—life in the Spirit, God's great surprise.