

## 5/28/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME

I hope you all have been enjoying the beautiful spring weather, that amazingly has been consistent for awhile and without too much wind.

Today is Pentecost, when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. As I said in the little box at the top of the bulletin, we remember Pentecost as a specific event that led to the birth of the church.

Yet Pentecost is also a repeating pattern of the Spirit of God bringing new life and breath, poured out without distinction upon all kinds of people. Today we open ourselves to what the Spirit is doing among us.

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

One thing that I'd like to report is that five members of our church collaborated to engage in Bible Study in order to submit notes that may eventually end up in the margins of the forthcoming Anabaptist Community Bible that will be published as part of the 500-year anniversary of the Anabaptist movement.

Our group consisted of Kris Schmucker, Renae Peters, Brian Stucky, Caleb Yoder, and Steve Banman. We were assigned the passages of Proverbs 23:10-18, Isaiah 49:8-51:16, and Galatians 6.

We had separate sessions for each of these passages, and worked with prompts that we were provided in order to guide the conversation.

It was rewarding to learn from each other's insights. We did our last Bible study at Bethesda Home where we were joined by several residents, including Glen Unrau, and we benefited from their insights as well.

### CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: God of wind and wings, gather us in this space.

**People: Light up our hearts for you.**

Leader: God of flames and fire, emblaze us with your passion.

**People: May your presence burn within us.**

Leader: God of resurrection, raise us from the ashes.

**People: We live now as people born anew, discovering life where there was once death.**

### INVOCATION

Gracious God,

When you open your hand, you satisfy all creatures with good things. When you send your Spirit, you renew the face of the ground.

God, let us know through your Spirit that you are near and that you are here. Breathe new life in all the dead places within us and in our circumstances.

Speak to us today in a form of language that we can understand.

Show us how we may come alive, be born anew, and be able to bless others that are in our spheres of influence.

Come Holy Spirit! Through Jesus our inspiration, Amen.

#### MORNING PRAYER -PASTOR LOIS

O God, we do thank you for sending the gift of your Spirit and we pray for that same Holy Spirit to come and fall afresh on us. To remind us anew of what you call us to, who you call us to be and how you call us to live. Remind us again that we can't do any of those tasks without the power of your Spirit guiding and leading us. In a world where so much is dependent on the power of our own human ability to understand and explain, remind us again that much of our faith is mystery, like believing in the wind although we can't see or explain it. God, renew our commitment to prayer, to keep our focus on the ways of Jesus.

One way that we help our children learn to do that – to stay focused on Jesus – is through Sunday school, mid-week lessons and VBS. Thank you God for these learning opportunities and we continue to pray for your blessing on the VBS lessons and activities coming up in a couple of weeks. May your Spirit be present in the planning, organizing, teaching and the whole process of adults and others being attentive to the lives and growth of children.

We know that Jesus loved and made space and time for children – they were important to him. We grieve the loss of all lives, but especially of children to senseless hunger, disease or violence. This memorial weekend, we pray for families, friends and all people everywhere who are grieving the loss of children. We pray for members of the Uvalde, TX community. We pray for parents and children who are waiting at the borders of our country and many countries for entry, seeking safety and comfort.

God, we thank you for our own forebears who came here, bearing witness to your faithfulness as *they* were seeking safety, comfort, and a better life for themselves and their children. The flags in the cemetery remind us that they came with faith, courage and action. In these moments of silence, we bring to mind those friends and loved ones who have died and for whom we are so grateful... (silence)

On this weekend, as we remember with gratitude those who have fought and died in this country and for this country, we also thank you also for those who have modeled the faithful act of giving their lives in the pursuit of peace.

Thank you, God, for the miraculous ways you have created our bodies with the capacity to heal. Thank you for medical education and expertise; give us patience and trust when even the medical professionals don't have all the answers or know-how. I thank you for Bethesda and for all who live and work or volunteer there. Thank you that Ilene Franz has found some comfort

and begun to have some healing there – I pray that would continue for her. Be especially close to the residents of Bethesda and all care-homes; let them feel your presence and your love with them and for them. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

#### OFFERING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

O God, as the words of the songs we just heard tell us, we are indebted to you and your grace. Let that grace bind our hearts to you; we are a wandering, fickle people, prone to leave you, prone to forget that until we find our rest in you we are a restless people. These are the gifts of money that we’ve brought to offer you today. Bless this money. Bless our time, our work, our thoughts and words that it may all be in your honor and for your glory. Amen.

#### UNEXPECTED NEW LIFE

Acts 2:1-21

The last part of the passage that Bryant read comes from the book of Joel. It describes a time when the Spirit is poured out on all people and then it lists examples: Both sons and daughters prophesying, young men seeing visions, while old men dream dreams. Servants both men and women will prophesy.

We could spend a good while talking about what all that means, but we could start by simply remembering that God’s Spirit can do the unexpected. Don’t discount through whom God can speak, in some cases without the full awareness of that person.

I consider myself blessed to have been able to spend time in a charismatic congregation when I was doing a service term in Honduras – this was the Mennonite church just at the end of my street.

When I say I was blessed to be able to experience a church with very different worship than what I grew up with, I don’t mean to say that it was perfect, that I understood it, or that I didn’t question it. But the experience certainly allowed me to interrogate my own spiritual and church background with similar questions.

Services were unpredictable, and often highly emotional, with some people even entering states of ecstasy. On one occasion a quiet 15-year-old girl named Sidia went forward. None of this was planned. She began to prophesy, her voice taking on a shrill tone. I was surprised that she had the courage to do this, since I had experienced her as somewhat shy.

It was hard for me to catch every word, but it was clear she was speaking for God – every “I” was not Sidia, but God. God, speaking through Sidia, was apparently deeply hurt. Betrayed by the sinfulness of people. Not so much angry – at least I don’t remember it as an expression of anger, but rather deep hurt.

What happened next was the whole congregation began weeping out loud. They called it “weeping with the Lord.” I, as the resident gringo, can’t say I had tears, but I definitely felt something, and almost wished I could cry with them.

Of course, I had questions: Was God specifically hurt by people in this congregation? But these people were so devout – they had services 6 days a week. What could God expect?

When I read the words of that Peter quoted from the prophet Joel, I think of young Sidia Vega, who afterwards returned back to her usual self, as if nothing had happened.

As in the prophecy of Joel, the Spirit is the great equalizer. The Spirit can speak from any voice and in any language.

My reading and experience suggest that unusual forms of consciousness like visions, dreams, ecstasies, or mystical experiences, tend to be accepted and taken much more seriously in other cultures. In the rich, industrialized, Western cultures – which includes us – we are skeptical of these kinds of experiences or tend to be embarrassed by them.

Maybe we have something to learn from other cultures. Maybe there's a whole other part of spirituality or the human experience that we somehow cordon ourselves off from. We certainly won't solve that today. We can be open to the incredible and the mysterious, while also maintaining healthy critical thought.

I have to say, I often felt uncomfortable at church in Honduras. And if we had been there at Pentecost, we would have been uncomfortable – especially if we were seeing flames and the sound of violent wind. Fire and strong wind together are two hazards that set us on edge in Kansas.

I think we can empathize with the people who thought these people were drunk on the day of Pentecost. We might have thought the same thing if we had been there.

What we do see is that the Spirit was moving and speaking through people you wouldn't have expected. No one expected a group of Galileans to be able to speak diverse languages.

So, what was going on that day of Pentecost?

It all started as disciples of Jesus were gathered in the same place in Jerusalem that day. Suddenly, according to the book of Acts, the whole house is filled with the sound of a violent wind. Then they see tongues of fire that divide and rest on the head of each person. That would be a unique sight!

I'm not sure if "tongue" is just descriptive of what an individual flame looks like – fire can look like a bunch of moving tongues – or if "tongue" anticipates the fact that the disciples will soon be speaking in different languages – different tongues.

The fact that the tongues rest on each person's head seems a little like a kind of spiritual oil of anointing poured out on each person. Additionally, for Jews of that time period, fire was often a metaphor for prophetic inspiration. The Spirit enables each to begin to prophesy, which is what they are doing as they speak other languages.

Pentecost itself was an agricultural festival that celebrated the harvests that God had provided. It was one of the most important festivals of the year. In the Jewish calendar, it is called the

*festival of weeks*, and came to also be a celebration of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai.

As suggested by the name “festival of weeks,” you count seven weeks from Passover. Seven weeks is 49 days, and the next day makes 50. Pentecost simply means “fiftieth.” In my half-marathon a few weeks ago, I finished 51<sup>st</sup> of all the males, so in Greek you could say I was the *pentecostos protos* – the 51<sup>st</sup>. Today is exactly seven weeks after Easter, and if you call Easter day 1, today is day 50.

OK, so why does any of this matter?

It’s debatable what meaning the festival of weeks had in the minds of the early disciples of Jesus and how it connects with the outpouring of the Spirit and birth of the church.

If we connect it to the agricultural meaning, then Pentecost was the first major spiritual harvest. If you connect it to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, then the Spirit is the second Torah, who has come to dwell in our hearts as the fulfillment of the purpose of God’s Torah.

In any case, a festival like this meant that you had visitors in Jerusalem from all over. All practiced Judaism in some way, whether they were Jews by birth or proselytes. But they lived in all different regions of the known world. Kind of like a Mennonite World Conference. And since Jews lived all over the ancient world for successive generations, they came to speak the local languages of the places they resided in.

That’s the surprise about the outpouring of the Spirit. Most of these visitors probably expected to get by with whatever Aramaic or Greek they knew, like a modern traveler who has a trusted cheat sheet with important phrases like, “where’s the nearest bathroom?”

But you don’t expect to run into some Galileans who speak perfect Arabic, or perfect Latin, or perfect Coptic. There’s the surprise! This is more than the incomprehensible babble of people speaking in tongues. This is the Spirit speaking everyone’s language.

Missiologists such as Lamin Sanneh from Gambia have written about how faith comes alive most when it is practiced in a group’s mother tongue. Bible translation into local languages, even when people might comprehend it well enough in a national or trade language, has been crucial to the vitality of the church in cultures around the world.

In our own lives, we may not hear the Spirit speak in audible words, and when we do engage in spiritual discernment, we might be careful to recognize that it is still us attempting to put it into words. Yet the idea of God speaking our language is important because it means that God is near rather than far off.

It is part of the pattern of incarnation. God’s wisdom and love were embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, and now God’s breath and voice are embodied in human tongues, words, poetry, and songs.

Pentecost is not simply an event that happened one time in the past, that we recognize once a year. Pentecost is a repeating pattern of new life in the places that seem dead; new breath where there is lethargy; strong wind where we are stagnant; a kindled fire where we are cold.

We have to claim this pattern, look for it, and seek to live by it. There is never reason to give up, even when we are disappointed. At Alexanderwohl, we are still recovering from the disruption of Covid. We are still feeling the pain of change in who we see in our church family.

While the Spirit spoke many languages at Pentecost, we feel sometimes like we don't all speak the same language when we have significant differences of theology or even how we articulate our values. We are tired and sometimes struggling to have energy for the ministries that we have engaged in in the past. With that fatigue, it's difficult to get excited, kindled about something new, to see the possibilities for how our church can bless people in the community.

What we can do is pray for the Spirit to enliven us and speak to us. And listen, watch, pay attention.

The answer we hear back might be unconventional. It may not be what we were taught to expect. It may come from voices we don't think of as having authority. But the first Pentecost teaches us to expect the unexpected. Expect new life where it doesn't seem possible, hear God's deeds from people we didn't expect to be the source of that revelation.

Come Holy Spirit. Fill us with your life!

## BENEDICTION

Adapted from Jim Cotter; Sing the Story 195

The blessing of God,  
the shalom of God,  
the wildness and the warmth of God,  
be among us and between us,  
through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us,  
now and always, Amen.