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Trinity Presbyterian Church – Pensacola, FL  
June 9, 2019 PENTECOST SUNDAY Cycle C

### **UNEXPECTED ACTS OF GOD: 6. Empowered by the Holy Spirit**

Acts 2:1-21 John 14:8-17

The Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen was the first explorer to discover the magnetic meridian of the North Pole and to the South Pole. On one of his trips, Amundsen took a homing pigeon with him. When he had finally reached the top of the world, he opened the bird's cage and set it free.

Imagine the delight of Amundsen's wife, back in Norway, when she looked up from the doorway of her home and saw that pigeon circling in the sky overhead. She yelled to her neighbors, "He's alive! My husband is still alive!"

That's not too far a stretch to think what it was like after Jesus ascended into heaven. He was gone, he was out of sight, but his disciples clung to his promise to send them Holy Spirit. Imagine their joy then when they saw the dovelike Holy Spirit descend upon them at Pentecost. They now had with them a continual reminder that Jesus was alive and victorious at God's right hand in heaven. And here and now, with them, among them, within each of them, the Holy Spirit dwells, bringing power and guidance, enabling them to be the people of God and to do the work of the people of God. (Larson, 115).

Pentecost is the anniversary of the Holy Spirit coming to the church assembly, the birthday of the church, the empowerment of us as followers of Jesus Christ, as the hope and power and joy of God alive in us!

Our God is the master of surprises and savior of lost causes.

In the Old Testament

- Abraham and Sarah give up hope of having a child into their 90's, until God made them a promise.
- The Israelites flee from the Egyptians only to be trapped at the shore of the Red Sea, until God separates the water and provides a dry escape route, then collapses the water back upon the Egyptians, delivering the Israelites into freedom!
- King David of Israel committed adultery with Bathsheba and fell into public disgrace – then his shame prompted public repentance and earnest prayer, which we know as Psalm 51. David is restored to rule decades more and from his lineage Jesus the Messiah is born.

In the New Testament

- Peter fished all night without catching anything before Jesus told him to cast his nets on the other side of the boat – and the nets brimmed with fish.

- A woman who had suffering bleeding for twelve years encountered Jesus in a crowd, touched the hem of his clothes and was healed.
- Jesus was crucified dead and buried in a tomb...until the third day brought a surprise the world had never seen.

So why are we surprised when God shows up and reverses our circumstances stacked against us or against the success of his kingdom? Fifty days after Easter the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus...tongues of fire, wind, and suddenly ability to speak other languages! No one knew what to expect; they certainly didn't expect something like that! And though we fixate on the strange events that happened – tongues, wind, fire – perhaps the biggest surprise, the biggest outcome, the sweeping change, is the change in the followers of Jesus! Once they received the Holy Spirit, and from that point on, they were different! They were bolder, able to minister with the power and gifts of the Spirit, more united, and determined to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world! The church had been born and the body of believers was empowered! The Holy Spirit made the early church effective; the Spirit is what makes us effective today!

The surprises, the amazing and unexpected acts of God in the book of Acts, the stories we have looked at these last few weeks, would not have happened without the day of Pentecost.

- Peter and the other apostles continuing to preach when the priests threw them in jail and ordered them to be silent and quit preaching!
- Saul's conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus and Ananias giving Saul back his sight them baptizing him into the church. Their unlikely friendship like that of Ron Hall and Denver Moore as told in *Same Kind of Different as Me*, joining forces to help the homeless in Fort Worth, TX.
- Peter raising Dorcas from the dead and restoring her to her ministry of feeding and clothing the widows and orphans of Joppa.
- Peter's vision of the sheet lowered from heaven holding the animals no longer unclean but now acceptable to eat, and his visit to Cornelius in Joppa leading to the acceptance of the Gentiles into the church.
- Paul and Silas going West to Macedonia instead of East to Bithynia and a chance encounter with Lydia, the first convert to the faith in Philippi, who sets up her home as the home base for the mission taking the gospel to Greece and Europe. Coincidence or providence?
- Paul and Silas' release from prison and the slave girl released from the evil spirit who controlled her, the Philippian jailor saved from suicide and converted to Christ; freedom to those imprisoned by sin, by fear, by their past.
- None of these surprises would have occurred without the Day of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the birthday of the church.

The Holy Spirit turned that rag-tag band of followers into a powerful force winning the world to Jesus Christ and God's salvation! The Holy Spirit gives us success today.

In our successes, thank God!

In our failures, let us remember that God never forsakes us or gives up on us.

I share with you Martin Bell's reflection "Rag-Tag Army" in his book, *The Way of the Wolf*, to illustrate what I mean.

I think God must be very old and very tired. Maybe he used to look splendid and fine in his general's uniform, but no more. He's been on the march a long time, you know. And look at his rag-tag little army! All he has for soldiers are you and me. Dumb little army. Listen! The drumbeat isn't even regular. Everyone is out of step. And there! You see? God keeps stopping along the way to pick up one of his tinier soldiers who decided to wander off and play with a frog, or run in a field, or whose foot got tangled in the underbrush. He'll never get anywhere that way. And yet, the march goes on.

Do you see how the marchers have broken up into little groups? Look at that group up near the front. Now, there's a snappy outfit. They all look pretty much alike—at least they're in step with each other. That's something! Only they're not wearing their shoes. They're carrying them in their hands. Silly little band. They won't get far before God will have to stop again.

Or how about that other group over there? They're all holding hands as they march. The only trouble with this is the people on each end of the line. Pretty soon they realize that one of their hands isn't holding onto anything—one hand is reaching, empty, alone. And so, they hold hands with each other, and everybody marches around in circles. The more people holding hands, the bigger the circle. And, of course, a bigger circle is deceptive because as we march along it looks like we're going someplace, but we're not. And so, God must stop again. You see what I mean? He'll never get anywhere that way!

If God were more sensible, he'd take his little army and shape them up. Why, whoever heard of a soldier stopping to romp in a field? It's ridiculous. But even more absurd is a general who will stop the march of eternity to go and bring the soldier back. But that's God for you. His is no endless, empty marching. He is going somewhere. His steps are deliberate and purposive. He may be old, and he may be tired. But he knows where he's going. And he means to take every last one of his tiny soldiers with him. Only there aren't going to be any forced marches. And, after all, there are frogs and flowers, and thorns and underbrush along the way. And even though our foreheads have been signed with the sign of the cross, we are only human. And most of us are afraid and lonely and would like to hold hands or cry or run away. And we don't know where we are going, and we can't seem to trust God—especially when it's dark out and we can't see him! And he won't go on without us. And that's why it's taking so long.

Listen! The drumbeat isn't even regular. Everyone is out of step. And there! You see? God keeps stopping along the way to pick up one of his tinier soldiers who decided to wander off and play with a frog, or run in a field, or whose foot got tangled in the underbrush. He'll never get anywhere that way!

And yet, the march goes on... (Bell, 91-93)

The Holy Spirit lives and breathes in each and all of us!

Paul writes in Romans that the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and convinces us of God's forgiveness, thereby enabling us to confess our sins, to repent, and to receive God's grace in Jesus Christ!

The Spirit ushers us into a life-giving relationship with God and brings us the blessings of God in Jesus Christ!

The Spirit equips us and empowers us to do what God asks of us, needs of us.

The Holy Spirit guides us with the wisdom of our loving God.

The Spirit gives us courage.

The Spirit fills us with love so that we may love one another even as God loves us.

The Spirit draws us together as the people of God and enables us to do will of God.

The Spirit makes us a witness of God's presence and power in the world!

Thanks be to God!

#### Sources

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