

“Spirit Inspired”  
Psalm 104:24-35; Acts 2:1-21;  
1 Corinthians 12:3-13; John 20:19-23

Day of Pentecost, May 31, 2020  
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We come to this special day, a day a little unlike most others in the church year. It's a day when we think about the Holy Spirit—how the Holy Spirit was received by the disciples and how, indeed, they were engaged again with and through that Holy Spirit. So as we come, we are invited to think about the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples and what it meant for them, why it might have happened.

Why did the Holy Spirit come to the disciples? It is in part about them being uncertain of what to do next. They had been given direction by Jesus to go and serve as he had served them, and yet they are not quite sure how to do that. They are not sure how to span the struggles of their day, the separations between peoples. Indeed, it is a time when many peoples from many nations have come to Jerusalem to try to understand and to celebrate God's presence in their lives. The disciples are at a moment of uncertainty.

I think we, too, in many ways are in a moment of uncertainty. In this moment of uncertainty I wonder what we need, as well. But let me talk about why I feel we are in such a moment of uncertainty. You see, in the midst of this pandemic and all that is going on, we can recognize that we are struggling to understand what information to even pay attention to. I read an article in *BuzzFeed*, an online magazine and news source. There's a little irony in this because they are asking how much we can trust what we read online, and here I am reading this article online. It feels like a hall of mirrors. That's what they are talking about.

They have written about how they felt technology was taking us into a new situation where figuring out what is right and wrong is hard. They are suggesting that this pandemic has made it even harder, has perhaps accelerated the process because, they say, “The global pandemic unleashes fear and uncertainty and economic catastrophe among a deeply polarized public. We have motivated and well-organized fringe and conspiracy groups eager to seize the moment to reach the mainstream. We have seemingly authoritative sources and institutions that stoke disagreement and fail to communicate effectively with the public.”

I think one of the poster children for this was that documentary formatted piece called *The Plandemic*, which has been shown to be full of inaccuracies. It was presented by a scientist who had academic credentials, had worked in a place that made it seem like she should be an authority, but credentials don't restrict somebody from giving bad advice or promoting falsehoods.

So, we have to struggle with the question of what information do we actually pay attention to. I don't think this is a new problem. We have had to struggle with understanding, watching, and figuring out what we should pay attention to for a long

time. We have created scenarios that continue to play out among us. The scenario of race, for example, continues to play out among us as if there were real distinctions between different races of people because we have different colored skin, perhaps. In making those distinctions, we can create an Us and a Them. I think we see that continue to play out in the violence against African Americans, causing the loss of life. We see the use of racism continues to be a way of seeing things and it plays out in people's lives to their detriment.

We see this misinformation becomes part of how we understand the world. We have to figure out how to get away from that. And yet, it's hard to do when we have a situation that we don't understand completely. When we are uncertain, we want to have control. We want to feel like we have a way forward. Sometimes we just can't figure that way forward out. We don't know. If we can think that there is a perpetrator of the problem, we can focus on that.

There has been research on what happens when we begin to stoke our anger. This is from another online magazine called *Vox.com*. It's an article about a woman whose husband ends up having a brain tumor, and how she went through the anger that it caused, and how she wanted to blame all kinds of people for the problem. She looks at the research and realized that as she saw her own anger grow, that *"anger translated into a higher perception of control. Once anger triggers feelings of control, feelings of optimism follow."* I'm actually quoting her. *"Under conditions of uncertainty, information that helps direct our negative emotions towards a target is psychologically comforting."*

We have a situation that's hard to understand. We have a lot of misinformation. We have people telling us, "Here's a way to target your anger." And if we begin to do that we can begin to join a camp and feel like, yeah, we're the ones. We're right. Then something called confirmation bias can set in and we can begin to see the world, not the way it is, but the way we think it is. We begin to interpret information from our existing belief. We can remember the details that uphold our own beliefs and ignore information that challenges our beliefs.

Sometimes I wonder, when you put those things together, how we still see so many people aren't giving into anger but are finding ways to help, to care, to continue to do what is safe, to wear masks, to social distance, to stay in isolation longer for the safety of themselves, perhaps, but often for others. The disciples, in a sense, were also becoming isolated from their society, from their people, because they saw things differently. That's what we can do as we begin to have regional groups or as we begin to have thought cohorts. If we just listen to particular news, if we don't pay attention to what else is going on, we can live pretty much in our own little enclave.

When I was in Switzerland, one of the things that always surprised me was that they have what they called hanging valleys in the Alps. A long time ago, glaciers created these hanging valleys. It eventually warmed up, and people began to live in those hanging valleys. This would have been in the middle ages. The people in those hanging valleys hardly ever left them. For one, to leave the valley was a little difficult.

They were called hanging valleys for a reason. There was a point at which there was a very steep drop-off to the valley floor. In the hanging valley itself, there could be a very gentle U-shape where the glacier had cleared it out. You could have two communities in two hanging valleys close to each other, perhaps next to each other with a mountain in between, and over the centuries they began to have different customs. The language changed and they began to have difficulty understanding each other. Sometimes I wonder if that's not what we're doing today when we create our own enclaves, our own little group of folk where we see the world in just one way, where we've created a group that feels good to us.

The disciples easily could have done that. They could have created their own little enclave and taken their time to simply worship God, and pray, and read scripture. But that's not what happens. They could have been a group that tried to stay close together because they were afraid of the world and afraid of losing control of their lives. First, Jesus breaks into that. When they are behind closed doors, he breaks in and says, "Peace be with you." So where do we start? We start with the peace of Christ that Jesus gives us in knowing God's grace and in trusting in him. Then we can begin to have a foundational peace to work with and from. The second thing he does is to invite them to receive the Holy Spirit.

Now, if we take Acts as an example of what happens when one is open to the Holy Spirit, having opened themselves to receive it from Jesus and now waiting for further instruction, the Holy Spirit comes upon them. This is a description that we should have a little familiarity with, and not necessarily biblical. So often in our movies, we have individuals who encounter some kind of unusual circumstance. A spider bite, perhaps. A certain amount of radiation. Coming from a different planet. There is an unusual circumstance that gives them superpowers. Now when we think about the kind of superpowers that we fantasize a person needs, we think about being faster than a speeding bullet, able to stop a speeding train, flying higher than an airplane. We think about strength in the physical world that can stop the badness of another through violence. It overcomes evil by destroying it.

It's so interesting to me that reading the New Testament seems so contradictory to that approach. Instead of crushing your enemies, Jesus says, you are to love them and pray for them. The Holy Spirit here gives the disciples a specific superpower, and it's none of those that we might think. No X-ray vision. No bolts of lightning. No ability to overpower. What do they get? They get the ability to speak another's language. People from all over. People that most Jews would not consider worthy to be considered a Jew. Now they are able to communicate with others. That's their superpower. They can communicate the Good News. They can talk about our dreams. They can prophecy. They can talk about God's word. They can extol the vision God has given them. They can follow Jesus as ones who communicate God's will. Most of Jesus' life is about communicating God's will, and the way that God has created the world so that we might live in it and have a good life. That's their superpower.

We might get the idea as we read the John passage, and sometimes we read it this way, that forgiveness is a superpower and that we can use it as a weapon. If we don't forgive those people, they won't be forgiven. I think rather it's more of a warning. It's a warning that in the world we live in, if we don't forgive, there is no forgiveness. That is, if we don't forgive, we remain in brokenness. All our lives, we will have to walk through a landscape strewn with brokenness. Jesus, broken as he was physically, being nailed to the cross, prays for those who are doing this, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." He teaches us to forgive. He teaches us to pray about forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer. Lord, forgive our sins as we forgive.

The Spirit's superpower is that we might actually be able to speak another's language. That maybe we can pay attention to what's important to someone else. That we can bring the Good News to each other in a language we can understand together so that we do not live in a landscape of brokenness.

Jesus invites us to new life, to wholeness, to healing, to life in the kingdom. So as we celebrate the coming of the Spirit today, let's open ourselves to receive it, realizing that what we may receive, what we may learn, what we may find, is that we can begin to speak a language that others can understand and perhaps we can understand them. Perhaps we can learn to forgive so that we don't live in a landscape of brokenness, but rather, build the kingdom of God and prepare for life everlasting.

I pray that the Spirit comes upon us so that we can speak each other's language, that we can forgive one another, that we can truly show the grace God has given us to each other. Amen.