

What Does This Mean? (Pentecost)

Acts 2:1-8, 12-13

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First Presbyterian, Luling

“What does this mean?” asked the crowd who gathered when they heard and saw the chaos that the gift of the Holy Spirit had instigated among those who had followed Jesus in Jerusalem. There was a mixture of languages, yet everyone listening in the crowd could hear and understand in their own language. There had been wind and fire and confusion and chaos. “What does this mean?” asked the Jews from all over the world, who gathered quickly to watch the spectacle? They were “amazed and astonished and perplexed,” Acts tells us. Amazed isn’t like, “wow, would you look at that?” It’s more like, mouths gaping open, hearts beating faster, heading toward frightened.¹

They are completely bewildered, have no idea what is going on. And so some of these observers, desperately casting about for any reasonable explanation, make a logical conclusion that the smaller group who is proclaiming the gospel in all kinds of languages, all at once, with the wind and the fire and the chaos, must be drunk. It’s not an illogical answer to “what does this mean?”

“What does this mean?” when we’ve never seen anything like this before, when we’ve never heard anything like this before, when nothing is routine or orderly or what we were expecting. As the church, we’ve domesticated Pentecost a little bit, turning it into a celebration of the Holy Spirit, and the birthday of the church, and we wear red and blow pinwheels and light extra candles. That celebration all makes sense after the fact. But in the midst of it, I can imagine that the crowd and the wind and fire—I do believe wind and fire are not a great combination—and the loud mixed up voices, all talking at once. Well, that would have been enough to make me want to leave. Pentecost was disruptive, disruptive to peace and quiet, and disruptive to what people thought religion should look and sound like.

“What does this mean?” I’ve said that to myself a number of times this week, and in the past few months. Along with “what is going on?” “How does this keep happening?” and “How much more can this country take?”

This isn’t my original thought, but it stuck with me. I saw somewhere this week that our country is in the midst of two pandemics. One is Covid-19, and the other is racism. Both affect and impact people of color disproportionately and more adversely than they do white people. One is new. One is older than the country itself. What does this mean?

It means that once again, after nothing has changed for the better, after immense pain and anger over injustice have erupted into protest, there are people crying out for justice in our streets, there is a horrible cycle of violence that we have not learned to interrupt, there are people using other peoples’ pain for their own purposes, there are tears and death and hurt. There are people who deep down, really and truly believe that their skin color makes them superior to people with a darker skin color. It’s the original sin of our country, and we are all captive to it still. It’s destroying us, all of us. God calls us to repent.

¹ Margaret Aymer, workingpreacher.com, 2017.

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3282

The chaos of protests and tear gas and marching and fires and shouting and destruction—well, we are amazed and astonished and perplexed. And now we know how those adjectives don't always mean something fun is happening.

“What does this mean?” It's a lament and a cry for justice and understanding.

And no one was feeling secure or certain when these protests were born, or rather, rekindled. Black people and other people of color never feel completely secure or certain in our country. But due to the spreading virus, everyone else was also feeling insecure and uncertain, only from a different cause. We have been amazed and astonished and perplexed at how quickly things have spiraled out of control. We don't know what we don't know about this virus, and we don't know how our efforts at preventing its spread will work in a sustainable way. Everything is harder and requires weighing of risks that no one can know, and it leaves a person unsettled, to say the least. And I know that I say all of that from a place of great privilege, because there are plenty of our neighbors who have lost their jobs and income, who don't have money for food or rent or to run the air conditioner this summer. They can't work from home. They do the jobs that pay the least but are most essential. Their uncertainty is far more threatening than anything I have been feeling.

I'm not telling you anything you don't know about any of this. But when we put it all together, it's a lot. It's chaos. It's out of control. There are forces we can't see and don't fully understand. There are voices yelling at us from every direction, and we are trying to hear the language we understand, the words that speak the truth and give us life.

“What does this mean?” I'm comforted that Peter didn't really have his own words to answer that question either. I'm not sure I've come up with any satisfactory answers this week. Peter turns to Scripture to answer the question, to the prophet Joel, who looks ahead to the “day of the Lord,” a day that would ultimately bring justice, but would be frightening and chaotic. But in these last days, Joel assures all perplexed and astonished and amazed people of all times, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.” And he closes with “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

The children are out there, prophesying. The people are seeing visions and dreaming dreams of justice and the peace that can come only from justice. Everyone gets the Spirit—there is no discrimination in age or gender or skin color or class. Everyone can prophesy, can tell of God's deeds of power and their visions and dreams in their own languages. Everyone can call on the name of the Lord, and all can be saved.

What does this mean? We need to listen. We need to listen for those prophetic voices, which can come from anyone. We need to look. We need to look for those dreams and visions. And we need to call on the name of the Lord.

Amidst the chaos, there are voices and visions that show us the way toward the kingdom of God. Let us pray for the wisdom and discernment to listen and follow in Jesus's way.