

Sermon – Something Old, Something New
Scripture Reading – Acts 2:1-18
Founders' Day and Pentecost, May 20, 2018
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

The events of the day of Pentecost are both surprising and expected. Expected because throughout the Gospel of Luke the Holy Spirit intervenes supernaturally on major occasions. Expected also because the disciples know that the coming of the Spirit is promised, even from the very beginning of the gospel. Yet, the coming of the Spirit in this time and place also is surprising. Gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost, bystanders are amazed to hear a multitude of languages being spoken by Galileans, who are notorious for being monolingual. If the disciples need convincing that their mission is to have a scope beyond their group and nation, this surely provides it. Listen now for God's Holy word in Acts 2:1-8, 12-18.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. (pause)

Members of the congregation speak vs. 17-18 in the languages of French (Carolyn Swanson), Japanese (James Maeda), Spanish (Peter Kieffer) and German (Bob Blythe)

Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ¹² All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵ Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*¹⁷ 'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that 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.*

*¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. Amen*

*This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.*

The title of the sermon: Something Old, Something New

The text: God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.... Acts 2:17a

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, from whom we came, to whom we return, and in whom we live, move and have our being, today we give thanks for the abundance of your Spirit and for the richness of our history. Continue to enliven and sustain us, beloved Advocate, every step of the journey we travel. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Today we gather on Pentecost to celebrate Westminster's 183rd Founders' Day. Today we honor our past and imagine our future with joy as we give thanks for the outpouring of God's Spirit upon each generation, old and new. Today we celebrate God's companionship and presence in our midst, something expected, yet something surprising!!

On that first Pentecost long ago God's spirit was up to something never seen or experienced before as a fulfillment of Jesus' promise to his disciples in the Gospel of John, chapter 15: "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth...will testify on my behalf." This was something new, something surprising; and yet, God's spirit has been strengthening and sustaining God's people from the beginning of time, something old, something expected.

The spirit that blew into that Jewish festival the first century was the same spirit that has been at work since the beginning of time. It was the same creative spirit, the same *breath*, in Hebrew *ruah*, which can also be translated *wind* that *swept over the face of the waters* creating the world. God's spirit is the power or force that gives order to the universe and gives life and breath to each of us.

God breathed life into the community of believers on that Pentecost long ago. *And a mighty wind rushed in.* God's spirit is often compared to the wind. Like the wind, one cannot see God's spirit, but one can see the effects of God's spirit in people's lives.

God's spirit blew through a group of men gathered in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival, fifty days after Easter morning. Pentecost commemorated the time of old when the Israelites offered their first fruits of the spring planting to Yahweh. According to theologian James Newsome, *Pentecost was both an end and a beginning, the leaving behind of that which is past and the launching forth into that which is only now beginning to be. It is moving forward into new dimensions of being whose basic forms are clear; but whose fulfillment has yet to be realized.*

As the Galilean disciples shared the story of Jesus of Nazareth at this Pentecost gathering, the spirit transcended the limitations of language and their words were understood by each in their native tongues. "How could this be?" some asked with amazement. The miracle of God's spirit coming on Pentecost is the miracle of people understanding one another, moving beyond their own particular dialect or point of view. The something new of the breath that breathed life into Christ's church was not the tongues of fire, per say, but the miracle of people listening to one another with respect.

God's spirit would soon transform the community that was to become the "People of the Way." The community that would welcome men and women, slave and free, old and new, coming together from different cultures and races, sharing leadership and possessions for the

good of all. God's Spirit, our advocate, would create something new, curious, spontaneous and tender. Long standing biases and prejudices would be torn down, bringing people together in the Spirit of Christ.

Sadly, over time these walls and divisions would return within Christ's church providing new opportunities for God's Spirit to bring change... reformed and always reforming...something old, something new.

Today we commemorate Founders' Day by honoring Abiah Hale, Albert's beloved wife and kindred spirit who shared her husband's abolitionist convictions and commitment to serving the poor and oppressed as our country moved toward Civil War. Abiah worked tirelessly through the Dorcas Society, holding on to what is right, bringing together ecumenical leadership and resources for the common good.

Even as we celebrate today Abiah's commitment to bringing equality and freedom to all God's children, yesterday the world witnessed something new and old in the royal wedding, as a descendent of the British monarch was joined in matrimony with a descendent of an American slave, both of whom are charismatic humanitarians committed to making a difference in our world today.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we give thanks for those who were a part of our beginning. God's spirit, our advocate, was creating something new, curious, spontaneous and tender through our founders. What a joy it is to continue the good work begun in this time and place through service and mission, through listening to one another with respect and being open to change our biases. Something old, and yet, each time it happens, something new, something expected, and yet each time it happens, something surprising!

Thanks be to God, from whom we come, to whom we return and in whom we live, move, and have our being, Holy Trinity: Creator, Savior, and Spirit of Gentleness. Amen.