

Sermon for 5-19-24

Text: Acts 2:1-21

Dear friends in Christ, God's grace and peace be with you always. Amen.

The author Margaret Atwood writes, "When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it."

It isn't until afterward that you realize you were in a story, when you hear it or you tell it to someone else.

The best stories come from moments of confusion and chaos. When I plan weddings with couples, I often tell them not to worry about the mistakes and foibles that inevitability will be part of the wedding day—the bride's gown getting a stain on it, the flower girl crying and refusing to go down the aisle, the DJ playing the wrong song for the couple's first dance—they may feel like disasters in the moment, but they will make the best stories, right? I'm sure many of you have these stories.

A few weeks ago my husband wanted to do something special for his 1st grade class. Every spring he turns his classroom into a national park, complete with fake trees and lakes and stuffed animals of various woodland creatures and reading caves. On this particular day it was gloomy and rainy, so my husband thought it would be fun to start up his fog machine, as one does.

His old fog machine broke, so he was using a brand new one, and this new machine apparently had the ability to create a denser and more wide-spread fog, because a few minutes after he started it up the fire alarms went off in the school and all 450 people had to evacuate the building and stand in the rain.

Now, while he was in the middle of this chaos, my husband experienced only confusion and fear that he would get in big trouble. But once it was over, everyone was safe, and the fire department was called before they had to come over, it became a great story, and probably one that his students will for tell for years to come.

This morning we celebrate one of the best stories in all of Scripture, the chaotic arrival of the Spirit on Pentecost, and the many ways the Spirit still arrives and moves in our world.

We create beautiful things to remind us of this story.

Those in the middle of the Pentecost story, when it was happening, experienced profound confusion and even terror.

What happens when the Spirit arrives as Jesus promised it would? If we go by Scripture's descriptions of the Spirit, when the Spirit arrives we will experience:

- Fear and terror.
- An engagement of our senses—the noise of a rushing wind and people speaking in different languages, the heat from the flames of fire, the wind blowing through the house, seeing everything descend into chaos
- Overwhelm by being forced to talk with strangers who are very different than us.
- A deep sense that we are unprepared for where God will take us
- Total confusion, that will later become a great story

When the Day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one school, and suddenly the fire alarms went off as the school filled with what seemed like smoke, and 450 people all had to leave the building at once, and divided classes had to leave in an organized fashion, only to discover it was caused by an artificial fog machine.

How often do we experience God's ways of working in the world as confusing, scary, overwhelming and even negative? Probably more often than we'd like.

It reminds us that even those of us who have spent time in the church—some of us our entire lifetimes!—still need help interpreting God's actions, and that we don't have all the answers.

We who see in a mirror dimly still have trouble identifying when we're part of God's story and when our lives are just chaos. It's not until we look back that we see God's handiwork.

God's Spirit also opens our eyes to the stories of others. We may not recognize the way God works in people who have different backgrounds and experiences of church and God. Yet the Spirit draws us together in mysterious ways.

The Pentecost story is not a story about speaking in tongues. Traditionally, speaking in tongues is spontaneously speaking a mysterious language known only to God and yourself—the people around you can't understand your words. In the Pentecost story, the Spirit gives the disciples the ability to speak in other languages that the people around them can understand. The Spirit creates a moment of connection across cultural and personal barriers. Those who might never interact are suddenly listening and understanding one another. Relationships begin, people hear the Good News, and people from every nation under heaven are transformed by the Spirit.

No one gives up who they are in order to hear the Good news. Variation is one of the church's original characteristics.

This is a glimpse of the promised kingdom of God, where strangers connect, those lonely and far from home hear their own language, and everyone understands the promises of God. Where our human barriers are broken by the chaos of the Spirit and we open ourselves up to God's vision.

Last fall, a group of people from the congregation I served as an interim went to Tanzania to visit their partner congregation. When they arrived in Iringa after hours and hours of flying, they were exhausted. Yet they decided to hike up a local historic stone rock to get a view of the city.

When they made it to the top of the rock, they were surrounded by a group of local African students. While they were chatting and taking photos, suddenly the students broke into song in beautiful 4-part harmony. It took a few minutes of listening, but some people from the traveling group recognized the song as the tune from an old German hymn that Lutheran Swedes would sing called "When Christmas Morn is Dawning." One of them remembered singing it on Christmas Day growing up.

They discovered that the group of African students were young Lutherans in Iringa for a youth conference. They were singing this hymn with different words, as it's now an important hymn for Tanzanian Lutherans.

This story of hiking to the top of a rock after hours on a plane, newly arrived to a strange place far from home, then suddenly hearing a familiar Lutheran hymn tune, is an echo of the Pentecost story. Confusion led to instant connection.

The travelers from the congregation still can't tell that story without getting tears in their eyes at the power of connection through music across the world.

Later, as the travelers worshiped with their partner congregations, they learned to hear the Tanzanian music and worship styles as given by the Holy Spirit, despite some of them being unfamiliar and strange. Their eyes were opened to the work of the Holy Spirit in all places, in all varieties and languages, present in all people.

May you know the power of the Holy Spirit in your life today, disrupting what needs to be disrupted and bringing you into new directions, from confusion into witness. Amen!