

If We Knew Then...

Acts 2:1-21

Growing up in a big family we were committed birthday celebrators. On your birthday, you'd get the You Are Special plate for breakfast and your favorite meal for dinner, and usually one time over the course of the day, Mom would talk about the day you were born, drag out the photo albums and exclaim about how cute you used to be. "Look at that adorable baby! How could we even imagine the person you would become?," she would say. Birthdays are a natural time to look back and see where we've been, because life has a way of taking us places we'd never imagined. Today is Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church, and two years since we set out together on the journey of being the church together in this place. Seems like a good time to look back to gather the courage to move forward, because the first disciples and all of us can definitely look at each other and say: "Wow, if we only knew the what we know now...!" Because the life of faith is a life that takes courage, confronting the unknown with commitment and faith because, of course, we can never know now what we will know at some point in the future, looking back!

This whole Easter season we've been thinking about how the gospel message—radical love, new life—can be decidedly threatening because it upends life in the way we know it, life that's comfortable. As we look together today at the story of Jesus' first followers and their adventures on the day the church was born, we can certainly feel the threat of discomfort, and I always think of the words of author and naturalist Annie Dillard, worth

revisiting every year on this Sunday, from her book Teaching a Stone to Talk.

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.” (Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Harper and Row, 1982)

Yes, Pentecost is the birthday of the church, but it's not really a story about the arrival of a nice, staid institution built to define tradition and maintain it at all costs, as the church is often mistaken. Nope. Pentecost is very often a big, huge disruption.

A threat to our comfortable order, you could say.

It's God, shaking things up, as God always seems to do, and those of us along for the ride holding on for dear life, not completely sure exactly where we'll end up. All that wind and fire, disruption, should have told the first disciples something, but they didn't know what was ahead...just like you and I don't know what's ahead. I wonder what the first disciples would have done if they knew then what we know now...?

Just to be able to gauge the disciples' mental and physical well-being during the period when our story from Acts occurs, I went online and completed the *Social Readjustment Rating Scale*, which rates stressors

and resulting personal vulnerability. You have to choose whether some of the following has happened in your life in the course of the last 12 months: death of a close friend, trouble with the law, change in your family situation, vocational upheaval, among others. I chose everything on the scale that had happened to them just in the 6 weeks since Jesus's arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. (The test didn't have the option, "One of your closest friends is resurrected," though I would guess that might count as a stressor as well.)

The ratings were as follows: a score of 0-149 indicates a low susceptibility to stress-related illness. 150-299 would indicate a medium susceptibility to stress-related illness, and 300 and over indicates high susceptibility to stress-related illness. Taking the quiz as the disciples might have, the score was, uh, 644. **644.**

In other words, after what they'd been through, it's shocking that the disciples were not...dead.

(You may be interested to know that I declined the opportunity to retake the test as myself. Sometimes it's better just not to know.)

It had been 50 days. About six weeks. A month and a half. Not that much time. Just 50 days since Jesus' resurrection. Jesus has just ascended into heaven, gone, and before he left, he told the disciples to go back to Jerusalem and wait.

Okay, let's review.

Jesus is gone; they have no leader.

Their group, which was not that stellar to begin with, has been decimated by death, betrayal, doubt, fatigue.

While they had little job security before, now they really don't have many options at all.

And, what they'd been thinking all along was a good vocational and political gamble had pretty much run out of gas and stalled.

At his ascension, when Jesus instructed them to go back to Jerusalem and wait, he told them power from on high was on the way. Their job was to hang on, to wait for what was coming next. If they had only known then...

Acts chapter 2 begins with this verse: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place."

That means, of course, that they were back in their meeting room.

But the phrase also meant, given the different shades of the Greek words here, that they were all together...all of one opinion...all thinking the same thing...all on the same page...all in agreement that their job was to keep working hard so things go on just like Jesus taught them.

And what better way to do that than to return to the same town, worship in the same Temple, keep up the lease on the same meeting space, begin deliberations about replacing their lost member Judas so there would be the same exact number in the group, and making absolutely, positively sure that Jesus will find everything in excellent order, just the way he left it, when he gets back?

But if they had known then....

Jerusalem was filled with people from all over the place that day—the text says "Jews from every nation under heaven." Many of them were visiting Jerusalem because it was Shavuot, the Jewish Festival of Weeks, and devout Jews were required by Jewish law to come to Jerusalem to celebrate. Shavuot was the marking of seven weeks from Passover, and the remembrance of Yahweh giving the Torah, the law, to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

But not all of the people in Jerusalem that day were Jews, because it was also a holiday in the way that holidays bring families and celebrations, travel and obligation into our lives, and lots of worshippers, merchants, and travelers joined the regular population of Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday.

And then it happened.

The overpowering sound of a rushing wind filled the house where the disciples were, slamming doors, flapping shutters, blowing around so hard that they had to cover their ears it was so loud. And fire...fire came down and rested on each one of them, a flame the text says. And something else happened. They were filled with the Spirit, and everybody started talking in other languages. All of the sudden, everybody there, all of the people visiting the city, all of the foreigners providing services, all of them suddenly understood the disciples, they heard their story in their very own languages. The Spirit arrived and the gospel message was proclaimed, and a whole crowd of people heard it, and it radiated out from that moment, and from right then...everything changed.

The whole world changed.

If only they had known then what was ahead:

- That the nice, comfortable, familiar city of Jerusalem was not their destination; it was just their starting point.
- That their understanding of God through the tradition and structure they had always known was not what their futures held; they might encounter God somewhere outside the Temple they had always known.
- That the upper room filled with familiar faces, even, suddenly became a thing of the past. It couldn't possible hold all the people

who wanted to hear, who had opinions to offer, who had voices to add to the conversation. It couldn't hold them all numerically, and it certainly couldn't hold them all ideologically.

- That being followers of this resurrected God would take them places they could never have imagined. A wind had blown in; fire had alighted; the Spirit of God had arrived.

If only they had known then...

if they had, would they have embraced the crash helmets, life preservers, and signal flares that were indicated by all that wind and fire? You and I can look back over two thousand years of history and tell those disciples: you'll be eaten by lions, this little community will lose its prophetic edge and be co-opted by empire, you'll become a bastion of corruption and misogyny. You'll become known for things like the Crusades, indulgences, colonization and slavery. The church will have a hand in excluding women and breeding racism and the thousands of suicides of GLBTQ people who heard and hear again even this week that they are not welcome in the church.

Whew. If they had known then what we know now, I wonder if they would have stepped out in faith that day?

And what about us? Two Pentecosts ago we set out on this journey of being the church together. In these two years, we could not have known all we have experienced together, and if we had known then what we know now, I wonder if we would have had the courage to set out on that journey? It's been hard; there has been so much change; we have felt the threat of resurrection all around us. Some situations have been decidedly painful; some days we have wanted to throw in the towel; the work and worry and

care of this community have seemed overwhelming. How could we have imagined the journey of change and transition and growth that we've been

The disciples didn't know then what we know now, but maybe what gave them the courage was the dream of radical love lived in community that can change the world. That HAS changed the world. See, they didn't know then...but maybe they suspected...that the church would begin with little communities holding possessions in common and being family to each other, that these communities would empower women as their leaders and welcome folks that others excluded. They didn't know, but maybe they imagined that the church could birth movements for abolition and suffrage, workers' rights and prison reform, religious freedom for all people and civil rights, too. Maybe they suspected that, if they had the courage to follow the lively wind of God's Spirit to places they couldn't see, the church would found hospitals and build schools, it would empower minority communities who were excluded from power elsewhere. It would become a platform for speaking up against misogyny and welcoming the stranger and standing arm in arm to say in the face of powerful opposition: you are welcome here. This is the church they hoped for.

And what about us? Here we are, celebrating once again the birthday of the Church. Maybe we're here because we did not know then what we know now: that we are part of a community that cares about issues that matter; that we are consistently invited into healing and hope; that we walk this journey with many faithful people who love us and accept us just as we are; that we have the rare and beautiful invitation to step into the beauty and pain of building diverse community; that we know people will be there when our lives fall apart; that our children...our children...their little lives and minds and hearts and souls are being cherished and nurtured in this

place; that new disciples are encountering this community and risking the possibility that they might follow Jesus, too; that our minds are engaged and our hearts challenged to grow in our faith; that we have here the Church of Jesus Christ: a place of hope in a cold, hard world.

This is what the church has been in its best moments. This is what we have been in our best moments these past two years.

And this is what the church can and must be...next.

Like the disciples, every day you and I stand on the edge of something. And today, Pentecost, is the day that we collectively stand on the edge of all we can do and be as the church in the world. It will be painful. We do not know now what we will know in another two years, or 2000 years, but be bold we must. The dream of healing, hope, justice, peace, beloved community is too important to shrink back to the familiar.

We can't possibly know now what we'll know in another two years...or twenty, or two thousand. But be assured: the Spirit of God is alive and well in this place. As she blows through our community, hear her whisper a challenge: "Bring everybody to the table—everybody." "Trust each other." "Don't be afraid to fail!" "Take a risk!" "Mix it up." "Be open to whatever comes next." "View the future with curiosity and hope." "Step out in faith toward whatever crazy direction God will lead you next." "Believe in each other; believe in God."

Our task as Christ-followers who live with the Spirit is to listen for the wind...watch for flames...look for the possibilities. Then join right in to help challenge what we always knew and reinvent what seemed to work perfectly fine...to turn things around so we can see them from a completely upside down perspective, to think outside the box, to welcome the threat of resurrection, to dream the most audacious dreams we can dream.

In other words: it's Pentecost. The wind is blowing; the fire is burning; God is up to something. We can never know now what we'll know years from now, but I don't ever want to look back and see that we missed an opportunity to be the church in the world in the best way possible.

Amen.

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