

St. Paul's Congregational Church, May 20, 2018  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21  
Pentecost Sunday

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I'd like to start our meditation this morning with a story - a story by Rabbi Marc Gellman from his book, *Does God Have a Big Toe*.

"Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, "Why don't you clean up this mess?"

So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, "Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be...just rocks."

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, "Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will become clouds, and some of this water will be... just water."

Then the angels said, "Well, God, it's neater now, but is it finished?" And God answered, "Nope."

On some of the rocks God placed growing things and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and

when God had done all this, the angels asked God, “Is the world finished now?”

And God answered, “Nope.”

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, “I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me...really, it’s almost done.”

But the man and the woman said, “We can’t finish the world alone. You have the plans and we are too little.”

“You are big enough,” God answered them. “But I will agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner.”

The man and the woman asked, “What’s a partner?”

And God answered, “A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That’s the deal.”

And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, “Is the world finished yet?”

And God answered, “I don’t know. Go ask my partners.”

Hello, partners! That's us – all of us gathered here this morning to celebrate the festival of Pentecost – we're God's partners. That's the challenge but it's also the joy of this day and all the days to come: we're all in this together because none of us can do the work of making this world a better place, of finishing the world alone! We all have to depend on God, we all have to depend on each other. And we dare not let each other or God down as we walk together.

Pentecost – this is the day that ends that in-between time we spoke of last week – the time between Easter and the Ascension – when Jesus commissioned the disciples to go into the world, but they and we are not alone. It's today we celebrate when the Holy Spirit filled those early disciples, when the Holy Spirit poured out on them - the same Holy Spirit that pours out on all of us, enabling us to be God's partners in finishing the world. And, God knows the world needs a lot of work.

Yet another school shooting. Possibilities of war around the world. People – children – dying in Gaza. More vitriol spewing from the mouths of too many politicians. Reductions in insurance coverage, families separated at our borders – the list goes on, doesn't it. Regardless of our political leanings, we here this morning are trying to follow Jesus – and his instructions to us, just like those earliest disciples, are pretty simple: love God. Love

neighbor. And, I must say, the sermon at the royal wedding yesterday laid it out to all of us: when love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever flowing brook. Imagine a world where love is the way. That's our call, isn't it! The world needs a lot of work – and we are God's partners.

We've seen remarkable displays of God's spirit in the Bible before of course – even with the “Special effects” – like Moses on the mountaintop, Jesus transfigured – these displays, though, were reserved for only a few witnesses – the most inside of the insiders. But here, at the dawn of a new era, with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost – this display is for all! Not only those disciples gathered in a room, not only the holiest or most faithful, not only the believers, not only those who were with Jesus on the road or witnesses to his resurrection. No, right now, right here everyone is invited and included: male and female, old and young, slave and free – all are welcome, included in receiving this gift of the Holy Spirit.

And just to make sure everyone knows they're included, the sound of a multitude of languages is overcome by a sweeping wind and an uplifting Spirit – divided tongues as of fire descended on them – imagine what it would have been like to experience that! How is it that each one heard words in their own language: in their

own languages they heard about God's deeds of power! Eloquent, impassioned spokespersons for the gift of new life, the beginning of a brand new era in which God is fulfilling promises and salvation draws near! For everyone! Not just the insiders: everyone – everyone heard words that before had sounded like just noise – those words have become filled with meaning.

Everyone – after the fire and the wind and the Spirit touched them and entered them – everyone started to do things they had never done before. They were made new creatures – brought to life – in a new way – like the bones in the valley of dry bones received new life in the sight of the prophet Ezekiel.

But there were then and still are those who sneer from the sidelines, “They must be filled with new wine.” But, remember what Jesus once said about new wine that bursts old wineskins? Rebecca Gaudino makes a wonderful observation: “These new followers of Jesus – the scripture tells us that the church expanded from 100 to 3,000 in one day – talk about a megachurch! – these new followers aren't filled with new wine – they are the new wine! Watch them burst the seams of convention.” Wow.

Of course, transition times are always challenging, even hard, aren't they. And this time was no different – there was so much joy and excitement but there was also wonder and confusion. This Pentecost event – the birth of the church - was a strong, joyful start

to what would be a long tough journey filled with threats and danger, and those threats and danger continue today – but also filled with communities of faith working together to create a world like Jesus embodied. The journey was not, is not, without struggles and resistance to change – but they and we are never alone. As we, like those Pentecost witnesses, work together to become the people of God intends us to be, we, like those witnesses, find our strength in community and prayer as we work together to create that new world as Jesus taught.

As we reflect on this Pentecost story of the birth of the church, how does it relate to the life of our church today? How might we reach across the differences in our own congregation, not only in religious upbringing, educational background, or basic personality types, to communicate effectively right here, to listen and learn - to hear what God is still speaking today, bringing us a call that may astound us and gather us into something more effective and more amazing than we've ever been before? What sort of power does it take to draw us out of the “all together in one place” like those early disciples – here in worship – and send us out with courage and energy to proclaim the good news of the Risen Christ? What loud noises and rushing wind do we need? For at the moment that the Holy Spirit descended into that crowd - at that moment when all the disciples of Christ became not only

capable of speaking all kinds of languages, they were also willing to use those languages to contact people they never would have thought of contacting before! Drawing together and going out! That's church vitality, isn't it!

A story: a young woman sat in her bishop's office talking about her first call to a church after seminary – it was to be to a small, largely aging congregation. She listened for a while but said that her dream had always been to work with children and their families – is this really the right place for me? Well, she began her ministry at this church with some hesitation – the congregation was wonderful but she longed for her dream of ministry to children and families to come true. One day she had a chance to visit a new mother and her baby in the hospital. They talked and suddenly she heard the mother say, “It's so hard to do this alone – we're so far from family support – I wish my mother and my husband's mother were closer so not only could we get help when we need it, but so my daughter would know what it's like to have extended family especially grandparents nearby.”

A lightbulb - I'd call it a spirit filled Pentecost moment - went off in the young minister's head – she had a congregation full of men and women who would love this! And so was born a ministry of visitation, of outreach to new mothers and fathers and

their babies. It wasn't long before the church was filled with these young families – new wine burst forth!

The spirit of God that has come at Pentecost is a transforming power that creates a new life, a new community, and a new world! And don't we all sometimes feel as though our own spirits are drying up – as individuals and as community. Aren't there times when we feel as though the spirit here at St. Paul's is drying up and we don't know what to do about it? In this valley of dry bones we get stuck. But the Pentecost story tells us that it is at times like these when we are experiencing a dead end and see no hope for our future, it's at times like these that God who is the life giving spirit starts to work for and in us, if we let it happen. The life giving power of the Spirit creates life where there is no life and can bring into being a new community and a new world.

Howard Thurman says, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

What makes you come alive? What gives you a transforming sense of joy, of being alive; when have you felt that breathtaking glimpse of the Spirit breaking in to your very soul and calling you forth, creating something wonderful and new! What inspires you, encourages you to take risks in your personal life? In your home? Community? School? Church? Job? What new work or insight

or relationship needs to be born? Where is the Holy Spirit moving in your life, in our life together, to extend the reach of the Good News? What's holding you back? What's holding us back?

Pentecost is a day for listening. Pentecost is a day for bursting forth in new wine – a day of hope, of promise, of joy, and of challenge. Pentecost is a day of savoring the story of courage that comes from breaking established boundaries. When we let go, when we let the Spirit in, beautiful things happen. See the vision! Dream the dreams! And go forth! Pentecost is a time to make space for Holy surprise!

I'm honored to be your partner in faith and I'm glad that you're my partners too. The world needs a lot of work – it's not finished yet! We all have something to offer. We are the new wine! Come Holy Spirit, come! Infuse us with your Spirit and let us go forth in hope, promise, and joy! Amen!

I'd like to take a few minutes now to honor one of our partners in faith – James, you have walked together with the people of St. Paul's for 19 years – it's a bittersweet time for all of us as you move on to Florida and begin a new partnership in faith there.

Our church family is constantly changing. People come and go. Babies are born. Children grow up. People commit themselves to one another. Loved ones and friends among us

come to the end of their lives. Individuals move into our community and church life. Others leave us, moving away to new places, new experiences, new opportunities.

It is important and right that we recognize these times of passage, of endings and beginnings. Today we share a time of farewell with a friend who is leaving –

We'll gather again this afternoon to celebrate James' ministry among us – but in the context of worship it seems appropriate to share a special gift – I know you've been working hard at decluttering, reducing stuff to take with you – but this doesn't take much space – a prayer shawl that you can wrap around you and know that you are loved and cared for and thanked for so much across the miles. You may leave Nutley but you are always surrounded by our love and led by the promises of God, the presence of Jesus Christ, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thank you – and may the blessings and peace of God go with you. Amen