

May 20, 2018



“WHEN THE WIND BLOWS...”

Acts 2:1-21

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Perhaps several of you rose early to watch the royal wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on May 19, 2018. Throughout the week as I prepared for a wedding here in Birmingham, Michigan, on the same day, I was fascinated by how many people in the United States were interested in the invitation list, the clergy officiants, who would escort Miss Markle down the aisle, and even what everyone would be wearing. Just what does one wear to a royal wedding, anyway? Well, I’m guessing that you and I didn’t have to worry about it this time around since we’re all here this morning. If we had been invited, you can almost bet that everyone would know what we wore. By the time church started this morning, the world would have already registered an opinion about our clothing choices. They’d know the designer, the cut, the style, and even the color. The internet was all lit up with thoughts about this wedding.

Speaking of the internet being lit up about clothing, in the early months of 2015, social media was all abuzz about another dress or at least a picture of a dress that was circulating virally on Facebook, Twitter, and a few other apps. Depending upon who was looking at the dress and the lighting, the dress looked like it was either white with gold lace or blue with black lace. Do you remember the controversy?

Like a number of other men, I struggle with a little bit of “shade deficiency.” I’m too stubborn to admit to being “color blind.” On the other hand, when they do that nice color dot test at the optometrist office, I often find myself telling the optician after the first couple of pictures, “I know that one of the next pictures is a duck. Another is a sailboat. And there must be a six or an eight in there somewhere.”

As a result of my “shade deficiency,” when the viral pictures of the dress came out in 2015, I thought that this was just a cruel joke. Dawn saw one set of colors while I saw another. How many of you saw blue with black lace? How many agree that it was white with gold lace, no matter what the designer says? Dawn often has a nice chuckle when I don’t see certain colors well. I might see purple and she tells me it’s really blue. I remind her that I see colors quite well; I just see them differently. Perhaps wrongly, but differently nonetheless.

You can only imagine my thoughts as once again this past week, in addition to all the media hype concerning the royal wedding, another viral controversy hit the internet. This time it was an

audible recording rather than a dress. It seems that someone was trying to record another person pronouncing the word “laurel” for an online dictionary, but instead the word that was pronounced was “yanny” (like “nanny”). Even the recording artist, Yanni, agrees that he only hears “Yanni.”¹

So to put the issue to rest, how many of you heard “yanny” when you listened online? How many heard the wrong word...I mean, how many of you heard “laurel”? How many of you missed the latest viral internet audio clip? How many of you don’t care?

I want you to know that after I heard it on the radio that morning, I went straight home and asked Dawn to tell me what she heard. I thought it was another cruel trick against those of us who struggle with audio-deficiency, similar to the whole dress controversy. I jumped for joy when she told me that she heard “yanny.” At least I got to be right this time. Or so I thought. The recording was actually “laurel,” but again the mystery is in how we human beings hear things differently, especially recordings of recordings. I started a big debate in the office the other day when some of us heard “yanny” while others heard “laurel.”

Today is Pentecost Sunday. When we read the scriptures this morning, perception seems to be everything as the Spirit comes to rest upon the first disciples. While many had similar experiences, there were some differing opinions on what was actually happening that day.

Luke tells us that when the Jewish festival of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all gathered together in one place. Suddenly a sound came from heaven “like the rush of a violent wind.” The sound was so powerful that it filled the whole house. Then divided tongues of fire rested on each of the disciples as they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit empowered them.²

For the disciples, their first public preaching following Jesus’ resurrection was a communal event. All the disciples participated in the preaching at the same time. Many of those who had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost had gathered around when they heard the sound that was coming from the house where the disciples were located. As the crowds came closer, they were amazed and perplexed that they were hearing each of the disciples speak in their own native tongues. The disciples were Galileans. The crowds of people represented many areas of the known world at the time, and yet they heard the message of the disciples in their own language.

“Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans, and Arabs;” all these people who spoke so many different languages from the Hebrew or Aramaic of the disciples still heard the message in their mother tongues.³

While they were working to make meaning of this experience, others began to define it for them. Some were sure that the disciples simply had too much new wine to drink. As people gathered around, everyone was trying to make sense of what was happening. Their stories were varied. While some suspected drunkenness, perhaps others sensed an experience with God that they couldn’t quite describe or wrap their minds around. Before the gossip level got too high for the

early church, Peter stood up and quoting the prophet, Joel, shared with them that this is what happens when God's Spirit is poured out upon on all flesh.

As we celebrate Pentecost some two thousand years after that first event, what do we hear in the story? What happened to those early disciples when the wind blew, the tongues of fire rested upon them, and the Spirit arrived on the scene? What did it look like when the Church received the gift of the Holy Spirit? What is it that we understand Pentecost to be?

Now if you are in Berkley at their 10:00 a.m. service this morning, you will get to witness a fire breather bringing this part of the scripture to life. Pastor Shawn is preaching over there this morning, and I'm glad that he is since he is the pastor who relates to the Board of Trustees.

When the wind blew at Pentecost, however, the Church was born. The *ruah*⁴ of God, the Spirit of God, the breath of God that first breathed life into humanity, breathed the first breath of life into the Church. The wind that hovered over the earth at creation now hovered over the disciples at Pentecost. The body of Christ was infused with same breath of life that was present in the beginning. When the wind blew, the disciples were empowered to be the living body of Christ in the world. As they shared their witness, the language barriers that had divided people for so long were torn down.

What happens when the Wind blows; when the Spirit of God shows up? The Spirit falls upon all. The Church is empowered to tell the story and nothing can stand in the way.

The Rev. Dr. Thomas Long, the Bandy professor of preaching emeritus at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, tells the story of what happened several years ago, when he was the "brand new pastor of a small church." One week he announced from the pulpit that the following Sunday at 10:00 a.m. he was going to start a church school class on the basics of the Christian faith. He invited all those who were new to the faith or who wanted a refresher to join him.

When the next week came, Dr. Long went to his classroom expecting to greet a throng of people who wanted to study together with the new preacher. When he arrived in the room, however, he was immediately disappointed. It seems there were only three elementary school children, three little girls, waiting on him for the class to begin. He did his best to hide his disappointment. Over the next few weeks he worked hard to teach them about the Christian faith. The week before Pentecost Sunday, he said to them, "Do you girls know what Pentecost is?"

They didn't. So, he told them, "Well, Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads and they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world."

Two of the little girls took that rather calmly, but one of them had eyes that just seemed to be jumping out of her head. When she could finally speak, she said, "Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday!"

Dr. Long writes, "The beautiful thing about that is not that she misunderstood. The beautiful thing is that she thought it could have happened in our church, that God's Spirit could have come

even to our little congregation and given us a word to speak that the world desperately needs to hear.”⁵

What do we expect to happen when the Spirit moves among the Church today? What does it look like? What do we experience? What do we see and hear? Are we still amazed and perplexed at what the Spirit does among us?

Today, on Pentecost Sunday, we baptized six children at our 9:30 service. Right after the waters of baptism are administered, the family and others are invited to place hands on the child as I say, “The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born of water and the Spirit, you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.”

When we lay our hands upon a child, a young person, or an adult at baptism and later at confirmation, we expect that the Spirit of God will work in his or her life. Do we live with such expectancy from our own baptisms; with the expectancy that God’s Spirit is indeed at work within us, helping us to be faithful...to live as faithful witnesses of what God has done and is doing in the world around us and through us?

At our 11:00 service today, we will recognize our graduates. As we congratulate them for the work that they have accomplished, we also offer a blessing for them that the Spirit who has led them thus far along their journey will continue to be with them and to empower them in the road that lies ahead. We expect that the Holy Spirit will guide them and use their faithful witness throughout their lives to transform the world around us.

The good news of Pentecost is that the Spirit which was gifted to the Church some two thousand years ago is still at work among us today. Gifted by the Spirit, mission teams continue to transform lives and communities. Moved by the Spirit, the body of Christ lives a generous witness that the lives of children may be transformed through Sunday School, Preschool, Vacation Bible School, and music programs. When prayers are prayed at someone’s bedside in the hospital, rehab center, or home, we come to know that we don’t walk our journey of faith alone. It is the presence of God’s Spirit that empowers us for the journey together. As candidates answer God’s call to ministry in this place, it is the result of God’s Spirit at work through you, encouraging them on their journey.

When the wind blew among the first disciples, their lives were revived that they might breathe life into the world around them. As the wind blows upon us today, the Church continues to exhale the life, the *ruah*, the breath, the Spirit of God into the world around us that it may be transformed. When the wind blows upon us this day, might we be so convinced as to believe like the little girl from Dr. Long’s class? Could it be that God’s Spirit might come upon us here in our church and give us a word to speak that the world desperately needs to hear?

¹ <https://mashable.com/2018/05/16/yanny-laurel-audio-hearing-ear-damage/#.b6VU.IlzOqN>

² Acts 2:1-4.

³ Acts 2:9-11.

⁴ *Ruah*, or רוּחַ, is a Hebrew term meaning “spirit” or “breath.”

⁵ http://day1.org/3822-whats_the_gift