

Rev. Jerry Deck
Acts 2:1 – 21

June 8, 2014

Wake From Resurrection to Pentecost

Since this is the last day of our series on Wake: From Easter to Pentecost, I've been thinking a bit about Easter Sunday and the sermon I preached seven weeks ago now. We talked about the reality that it really is an outlandish, illogical, extraordinary claim to say that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that we shouldn't just brush over that fact. That because of this, it is strange that Easter Sunday is the Sunday when we try and invite visitors. That really we should bar visitors from joining us on that Sunday and instead invite them on a Sunday when we could talk about something like loving our neighbors or doing unto others as you would have them do to you. Something that is much more palatable, really. I mean let's not scare folks off before they get to know us a bit more.

And so, seven weeks later, we arrive at Pentecost, at the birth of the church. And much like Easter, if we're honest we will admit that again we are met with a remarkably odd, outlandish, remarkable story. Now, like the Easter story that begins in fairly normal fashion with women bringing perfume to help properly bury the dead Jesus, the story of Pentecost begins fairly mundane as well. Up to this point, as we saw last Sunday, they had been gathered together, waiting and worshipping and praying and listening to a sermon. Nothing all that extraordinary, really, and something which we do, well, every Sunday here. But then, all of sudden something happens. A rush of violent wind, tongues (like fire) came and rested on those gathered, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability.

Now, I don't know how to say this respectfully, but that's just strange, isn't it? I mean that's some pretty weird stuff. Imagine if you just stumbled upon this meeting and folks were just praying or talking to one another or listening to someone speaking. You could handle that, right? But then all of a sudden you heard these weird noises and something that looked like little fires and people began speaking in other tongues. What would you do? Watch in fascination? Run? Tell everyone you knew about the weird things you'd just seen? I can tell you that when I was growing up I always knew that if I was going to invite someone to my Pentecostal church with me I would never invite them on Sunday nights because that's when, well, some of the stranger things like this story talks about seemed to happen. Sunday morning, while things might get a bit loud and the preacher might get excited, there was rarely a whole lot of other-tongue speaking, so that was a safe time to bring a visitor. But whatever you do, keep the visitor away from when those weird, illogical, outlandish things happened.

So, yes, let's be honest in pointing out that the Pentecost story is, well, a bit odd. And as I thought about it a bit more, I realized that this probably shouldn't surprise us that both the Easter story and Pentecost story are audacious, outlandish. I mean, if the call of the church, as we've been talking about, is to be witnesses to the bold and outlandish claim that Jesus has been raised from the dead then why should we think that the birth of the church would

be any different? That the church should be personifying this bold claim in the way it began.

In fact, what might be more surprising than the fact that the church began in this way is the fact that we almost never measure the health of our own churches by the birth of this early church. Typically we measure the health of our churches by how many folks are coming in, by how many programs we have, by how many Bible studies we are engaged in. Now those things are not inconsequential and can certainly be a part of the formula for measuring a healthy church, however, if our call is to live in such way that we speak, by word and deed, to the outlandish claim of Jesus' resurrection, then shouldn't at least one of our measuring tools for how well we are doing our job of being a church, be whether or not we are living at times in outlandish, sometimes impractical and illogical ways? Shouldn't we be asking not just how many folks are coming in, but how good of a job we're doing at speaking the language of those who are outside of these walls? Shouldn't we be asking not just if our worship is alive and vibrant, but also whether or not we are open to moments of disruption when the Spirit of God might be working? Are we only doing things that make sense and are business-savvy or are there times when we do things in such a way that people around us might think, "Are those people drunk?!" Do we have the energy and excitement that can come only from the triune God, the resurrected Christ, the fresh Spirit?

Perhaps the best examples we have of churches like this here in America who are living in the spirit of Pentecost (by their energy, disruptive nature, and radical way of living) are new church plants. It was interesting during our "Dessert with the Decks" to listen to those who were here at the beginning of ZPC just 30 or so years ago. They talked about worshipping at the school, at the eagle that was in the middle of the gym where they were, but mostly they spoke of the excitement and energy of that time. There's a sense of newness, of not knowing what the future is going to bring, of having to depend wholly on the Spirit of God. Disruptions are commonplace in new church plants, there's a constant flux. It is a time of great uncertainty, but it's also a time exciting, faith-building stuff, when one can palpably feel its' dependence on the Spirit of God.

But then, and I might say almost inevitably, things begin to change. Now I'm not saying this happened at ZPC because I wasn't here, but I do know that for most church plants, naturally things begin to slowly change. And when does this happen? I think most often when that first brick is laid. Because sure enough, as soon as one begins to dig in roots and become more stable, you just naturally begin to ask different kinds of questions. In new church plants we ask questions like how we can reach out to those outside so that they will know that something new is going on. We're always asking questions about how we can speak the language of the outsiders because we know if we don't then there's no way we'll make it. In a church plant when someone new walks in it isn't long until they're asked to participate in some way because when you don't have a lot of people, everyone is needed to be a witness in one way or another. In a new church plant there is nervousness about the future, but well, we don't have all that much to lose, since we don't own anything and so there's an excitement that comes with that nervousness. In a new church plant there is built in chaos as you set everything up each Sunday and then break it all down, as you perhaps change locations. There's not a focus on the building because it's temporary.

There's lots of room for disruptions, because everything is fresh and no rigid set plan has been put in place.

But then, that first brick is laid and immediately things begin to change. It's just human nature. We start asking how we can properly preserve the building and the grounds. We worry about stains on the carpet (hence our asking you not to bring food or drink into the sanctuary) and about the water fountains and whether they are getting too rusty and shoot water out too quickly (if you're wondering, that was my observation when I first got here!). We do everything to make sure that worship runs smoothly and that there are no disruptions. In those times when the future looks murky (as is always the case with new church plants), this time it makes us much more anxious because we have so much to lose, having put our hard-earned money and energy into everything we now own. We end up spending more time asking how we are communicating with those inside the building and less time asking how we are communicating and speaking the language of those outside. We move from innovation, disruption, and flexibility to preservation, settlement and stability. It's just what happens.

Now, before you think I'm saying we should sell the building and go on the road, so to speak, please hear me. While I am saying that new church plants are oftentimes more like the church at Pentecost, I am not saying that established churches are bad. Because I think that buildings like this one can be a tremendous asset for the Kingdom of God. This building has allowed us to open up a daycare for the children of our community, helping us to love children, as Christ called us to. This building has allowed us to house the Boone County Food Pantry, which helps us to feed the hungry as Jesus commanded. This building at 116th and Michigan has served as a place of respite, as a sanctuary, a light of Christ in northwest Indy. Properly understood I think buildings and properties can be a great blessing to God and to the community. I am no purist who thinks if we aren't exactly like the church at Pentecost then we've lost it and we should sell the building and hit the road.

However, what I am saying is that we need to be mindful that as soon as a church signs the dotted line to buy a property they will have a natural tendency to want to stabilize and get everything in good proper order rather than be interrupted by the disruptive Spirit of God. They will be tempted to live life logically and securely instead of having the flexibility that is oftentimes demanded if they are to follow the winds of the Spirit. They will naturally begin to focus on what's happening inside these walls rather than being equally, if not more so, concerned with who and what is outside. They will quickly take on insider's language instead of figuring out how to speak the language of those in the community that surrounds it.

And so, the question that churches like ours must ask is how do we make sure that we are being open to the winds of the Pentecost Spirit, even as we are plopped down on this property. We have to be aware that our inertia will always carry us toward what is safe, predictable, certain. And one of the things that we have to do is to make sure that alongside asking questions like, "How many folks are coming into worship," and "What kind of spiritual growth classes are we offering," and "Do we have enough money to keep us afloat" we also need to be asking, "When's the last time we were disrupted by the Spirit of God," and "Have we done anything illogical and impractical for Christ in the last year" and "Are

we seeing people who look different than us, who speak different languages than us, who come from different cultures than us, becoming a part of our community?" Again, it's not that those first set of questions are bad, but it is that they are not enough, if we are going to keep in our DNA the Pentecost Spirit.

Folks have asked me from time to time what drew us to ZPC and I have mentioned various things: the theology of the church, the energy of the Pastor Nominating Committee, the closeness of the Starbucks, stuff like that. But one of the things that most drew me to ZPC was a simple conversation I had with a PNC member back on Friday, July 27th of last year. It was the night before I was going to sit down face-to-face with the committee for the first time, but before that he and I had an opportunity to have a brief conversation at his house. And during that conversation he mentioned to me that that upcoming Sunday, two days from then, ZPC was going to shut down it's worship at 116th and Michigan in order to go worship with other congregations at Shepherd Community Church near downtown. Now I know churches and I know that at most churches you don't shut down worship without a fight. I mean there are lots of really good, logical reasons to not shut down worship. What about people who can't make it downtown? What if we have visitors that day who wanted to visit ZPC? Won't our giving take a hit if we do that? Is it safe where we're going to worship? And so I asked him, "How much pushback did you get about this?" And when he said, "Not much, really" I almost blurted out, "I'll take the job!" Now, they hadn't offered it to me, which is why I didn't say it, but I wanted to tell him I'd take it anyway, even if they didn't offer it to me!

Why? Because it was a sign to me that in spite of all the good, practical reasons to not shut down our worship here and go to Shepherd community (like we'll do in 3 weeks), you all allowed yourselves to be disrupted, to be unsettled, to take an illogical step of leaving your home base, so to speak, going someplace that you don't know well, where you may not have felt comfortable, and where things were going to be much different than what you were used to. And there was something within my spirit that said, "That's a place where the Pentecost Spirit of God is at work." That's a place that is open to God working in new ways. Because if we aren't willing to be disrupted, if we aren't willing to do things beyond what is comfortable to us, then we will not be a church that is ready to be moved and blown about by the Spirit of God.

And if we want to continue to do be that Pentecost church we must continue to intentionally make sure we are open to disruption. That we don't get everything so planned out perfectly that there's no place for the Spirit to work. That we always leave space for new things to be born and flourish. It means that we take care of our building, but that we don't make an idol of it. That the primary question is not how we preserve it, but how we utilize it for the kingdom of God. It means that we love the people within these walls while constantly asking how we can speak the language of those outside these walls. It means that we balance our desire for security and preservation with our need to innovate and be flexible.

I look forward to worshipping with you the next two weeks here at 116th and Michigan, but I'm really looking forward to worshipping with you at Shepherd Community on the 29th. An opportunity for us to be disrupted by the Spirit, to hear languages other than our own,

to be uncomfortable at times and to worship God with the energy of the Spirit at Pentecost. Let us be open to the Spirit and let us follow that Spirit boldly to wherever it calls us to go. Hallelujah. Amen.