

Acts 2:1-21 ~ Message Bible

Why God Birthed Us

Day of Pentecost ~ Graduation Sunday ~ Teacher Recognition ~ May 19, 2024

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Introduction to the Scripture Lesson

Do you know your birth story? Were you born early, on time, or late? Did you make your grand entry upside down or right side up? I was born breech and born late, as the story goes, but with good reason... Why doesn't that surprise you? Today is the day we get to retell, celebrate, and reflect on the birth story of the church. From it we can learn about the "who" the "what" and the "why" about us: God's children, God's family, also known as the church, born in a surprising way at a certain time.

This birth didn't begin on Pentecost. The birth story of the church is also the story of God. The mighty power of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We know something about God and Jesus. But the Holy Spirit? That's the tricky one for cerebral Presbyterians who typically prefer a decent and orderly approach to faith and most things. This might help to fill in the picture: God the Holy Spirit, is also known as: Advocate, Ally, Comforter, Instigator, Good Troublemaker, Wind blowing, fire burning, LOVE of God within us.

Today's story is about God pouring God's Spirit upon us, infusing us, and *refusing* to give up on us: God's life-giving Spirit blowing, burning in every direction. First, let's listen to how it all began: The story of God. The story of us. The story of God with us.

The prologue of John begins the story of God in this way: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (*John 1:1-5 NRSV*)

From Genesis 1 we learn this about the beginning of us, God's children: "Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." (Gen. 1:26-27, 31a)

Just when they thought maybe God wasn't with them any longer, from the fire of the burning bush, God's Holy Spirit called out to Moses, to lead his people, to free his people from slavery. And Moses did. And for forty years they wandered in the wilderness. Fed. Protected, instructed, and surprised by the how and when, the who and the why of this Spirit of God, who was leading them all. The story of God with us, against all odds: God freeing us.

A while later, God came to earth in the form of a fleshy, gurgly, baby boy, (early or late, we don't really know, but awkward timing to be sure). And this baby "sang from a stable, and cried from a hill, then whispered in silence when the whole world was still. And down in the city, God called once again, blowing through God's people, on the rush of the wind." And *that* story, is today's Scripture Lesson, Acts 2:1-21.

Sermon

It was loud, it was messy, it was confusing: The service did *not* go according to plan. Jesus had told them the Holy Spirit would come upon them ("*not many days from now*, a "due date" of sorts. Through Joel, God had declared, "I will pour out my Spirit." Not dribble or squirt but *pour*. When they were gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, or *Shavuot*, the Jewish Feast of Weeks, all of a sudden: there were strange sounds of whistling, roaring wind, smells of smoldering smoke. People shouting: "Get the doctor! This baby isn't coming at all how we expected."

As we heard in the scripture: they couldn't make heads or tails of it: The Holy Spirit pouring out fast and fantastically. What? Uneducated Galileans: speaking in multiple languages, the native languages of everyone there.? People asking: "What is going on here? What does this mean? What was going on there tells us about what is going on here. That day in Jerusalem, back in the first century, when God jumpstarted what we now call the church, that Shavuot service, fifty days after Passover points the way for us today in 2024 in Marshfield, Wisconsin.

This whole story is our birth story. And our *rebirth* story. This whole story of Creator God making us. Calling us good. God not giving up on us. On any one of us: who were all made in God's image. God saving us. Creating, loving, and redeeming us to DO SOMETHING about this world of hate and hurt, prejudice and privilege. White privilege. Created in God's image, loved and redeemed through Christ, to DO SOMETHING about this world of greed where haves keep getting more and have-nots keep getting less and less. This world where children are dying of hunger every ten seconds. This world where people drown at sea or die of thirst in the wilderness, desperately seeking refuge for their families. This planet whose ecosystem we are systematically destroying. And Holy Spirit is asking: What are you doing?

I hear Holy Spirit pushing us to get going! We were birthed to break ancient schemes, to be bold enough to believe what Jesus said about us doing "greater works" than he did while here on earth. Yes: you and me, by the power of the Holy Spirit. For all people and God's magnificently diverse and glorious creation. We can get going and do something together. We can choose to close the gap between this Holy Power blowing in and through us. How? We are being called to go beyond the mind we have when we think about how God is calling us to be church together now. This day. These days.

You heard it: "*I will pour out my Spirit upon ALL flesh*: Let me "flesh that out" a bit for us. *ALL* flesh includes: babies with their tender behinds, toddlers with their scabby knees, teens with their pimply faces: all flesh that is pierced, tattooed, scarred, bleeding, bruised, freckled, dried, wrinkled. Flesh of *every* color. Conservative, Progressive, Mainline, sidelined, maligned. And yes:

Republican, Democrat, Independent, Libertarian, whatever one's politics or the lack thereof: ALL FLESH. Are we getting the colorful, jarring, yet beautiful picture?

I hear God calling us to stop abusing religion, or the Bible as a political tool to divide, control, or manipulate people. God doesn't. Neither should we. God has given us a love story. Bitter and sweet. Loving others as God loves us: that's why we're here. That's why God birthed us. As much as we like to think that somehow God likes us *just a little bit better* than those who are "not us." Our birth story tells us otherwise. Truly God loves us all the same: whatever our nation, race, state of health, illness, or disability: physical, mental, or spiritual. Whatever our sexual orientation or gender identity. God birthed us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Which means we are called to fight for justice for the "not us." Yes, that's hard work. That's why we need Jesus.

Did you ever think about how the more diverse we are, the more we look like the church we were born to be? Pentecost again teaches us that our Creator loves diversity. Luke goes into great detail in today's story about all the different people – he names 15 nations, symbolic of the whole world, and crossing lines: Jewish and Arab, city and country, those born into the faith (Jews) and converts (Gentiles or proselytes) that were gathered the day that God chose to not follow the bulletin and birth the church instead.

Beloved Community, whenever we cross the line: choosing to love the "not us" in our community and beyond, we delight our divine Parent. Whenever we welcome the stranger, listen to our young people, and honor our elderly, we are fulfilling God's dream for us. We do that one good conversation, one open-hearted, "I hear you." One genuine, "I'm sorry" at a time. These actions blow open the healing power of the Holy Spirit to mend this broken, hurting world. This is what we were born to do. So let us pray:

We name you wind, power, force, and then, imaginatively "Third Person."

We name you and you blow...

blow hard, blow cold, blow hot, blow strong, blow gentle, blow new...

Blowing the world out of nothing to abundance,

blowing the church out of despair to new life...

blowing to make things new that never were.

So blow this day, wind, blow here and there, power, blow even us, force,

Rush us beyond ourselves, Rush us beyond our hopes,

Rush us beyond our fears, until we enact your newness in the world.

Come, come Spirit. Amen.ⁱ

ⁱ From the prayer "To make things new that never were," Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, (Augsburg Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2003), p. 167.