

It must have been terrifying: 120 disciples, men and women in robes, crammed into a room built to hold 20, no more than 30 people comfortably. The festival celebrated the Spring Barley Harvest; Jews had come from their own countries, near and far, to Jerusalem -- to offer the first fruits from their fields, give thanks to God, and to ask that their crops would continue to produce. This festival of Pentecost had been held since the beginning of Biblical history. It was a time of meeting, greeting and rejoicing in the bounties of the earth and in the providence of God.

The disciples must be uncomfortably hot in the small room at this time of year. The high temperature in Jerusalem today is forecast to be 99 degrees. Surely they are feeling faint and longing for some fresh air and a cool drink of water; but they have been told to wait there for Christ's promise. They have been told that they will be 'baptized by the wind and fire' of the Holy Spirit. Surely they pray silently -- and aloud, together, for they are a close-knit group of the faithful, but are confused and losing hope. Being baptized with fire doesn't sound pleasant on such a hot day.

It is now 50 days past Easter. They know of Jesus' dramatic ascension into heaven and have been told that the Lord now reigns over all the earth, and that light is now dawning for the righteous. They are waiting; obedient, yet afraid.

Despite promises of salvation, they are still the oppressed people of the Roman government and the religious authorities. Nothing has changed!

Today we also hope to be inspired by the breath of God. We come here each week to wait upon the promises, and the spiritual renewal of the church.

Our church is presently in the process of a long-awaited renewal of our sanctuary -- but at Pentecost we speak of another kind of church renewal --

a renewal of the spiritual self, that revitalizes our lives and transforms us into the people God meant us to be; and I believe we are experiencing the beginning of this kind of renewal as well! It is difficult to reflect on changes that are taking place as we are living in them, but we can reflect on the churches of our childhoods and compare the changes easily.

Steve and I were born and raised in Carlsbad, and even though NM is a border state, there were no Hispanics in our congregation that I can remember. We were friends at

school, sang in chorus and participated in clubs and activities together; but we attended different churches.

When we moved to Las Cruces in 1970 to attend NMSU, this church was the same – it represented almost exclusively white middle-class society.

We never questioned it. In America, Presbyterians were expected to be so, and so it was.

Then, about 10 years ago, the cultural make-up of our children's S&L program began to change. In the faces of the children and the parents in the congregation I began to see the faces of the world, with languages and cultures intertwined.

I remember the day that this realization came to me; I was helping prepare for World Communion Sunday in the Sanctuary with the children as they practiced bringing down the flags of the nations and singing together with Beth; and as I looked on each precious face, I saw Pablo, and Ji Sun; Destiny, and my own grandchildren -- and thought: THIS is the family of God! It has been my favorite Sunday ever since, for it proclaims God's promise to continually create something new.

It is not always easy to be a family of God in our cultural diversity. Today we have not experienced the miracle of spontaneously speaking and understanding foreign languages. Pentecost is a gift and miracle of Creation, and an intentional sign from God. We have had other signs:

- In Genesis, God's Spirit creates the earth out of nothing by breathing over the dark waters.
- In Exodus, as the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness, God comes down with fire and cloud to Moses, to give the Ten Commandments to the people, so they would learn how to live together in harmony, righteousness, and peace.
- At the Tower of Babel, God makes it clear that we are to live to the glory of God and not to our own ambition; for in seeking our own glory, we forget about building the kingdom of God.
- In Nazareth, the Holy Spirit visited Mary revealing to her the part she would have in bringing forth the Redeemer of the World.
- At Pentecost, the power of God is bestowed on the people; and the once timid disciples find their voices to proclaim Christ. God's creative power is shown in its

fullest intensity to assure the people that it is no mistake. It is not sleight-of-hand magic, but a full-fledged miracle.

In these powerful and creative acts lie the greater purposes of an all-powerful yet loving God. On all these occasions God creates – and reveals -- unwavering intentions.

God has given the signs, and from that time forward, God encourages us to live out these intentions by remembering the signs. God's signs for this congregation were shaped in the beginning to be a mission church for immigrants.

Four generations ago, this church became sponsors to an Indonesian immigrant family with seven children. At the funeral of Margaret Hardin two years ago, I spoke with one of those children, now a grandmother, who had come to remember Margaret. Margaret had nurtured the family by taking stacks of National Geographic magazines to them so they could learn to read English and marvel about a wider world. Many members of this church embraced the family in significant ways. And this woman, remembering the gifts and support of this church, came to honor Margaret.

But who knew, in 1970, that our church would now be home to at least four cultures? When I look back just 10 years and see the first stirrings of an authentic family of God in this sanctuary, I am amazed at what God has done and continues to do in our congregation.

I remember the day that Ebenezer Tumban of Cameroon entered the sanctuary to worship with us. He was a PhD student, a third-generation Presbyterian and the first African of many to come to First Presbyterian. This magnificent man, in marvelous native clothing, seemed to appear out of nowhere! Then came Annenbom, Jean-Bernard and Michelle, Olivier and Prisca, Emmanuel and Mirielle, Irene and Simplicie, and now, Lyly, Richard, and Samuel!

I remember the arrival of Irene, after her husband Simplicie had begun his PhD studies. Irene knew no English, but she and Simplicie were eager to join the church. So that Irene's new membership would have appropriate meaning for her, Pastor Norm presented the questions of faith to Irene, Simplicie translated; and she responded in her native language.

One of the Cameroonian families visited their homeland and brought back to the church a gift -- the artwork we have displayed on the southwest wall.

During the presentation to the congregation the African students expressed their gratitude for finding a church family that welcomed them and made them a part of our lives. They led worship services with their lively call-and-response music, swaying in the aisles with rhythm instruments! They encouraged us to join them in the aisles as they danced their praise to God. Their songs included American hymns taught to them by missionaries in Africa. They served as deacons and sang in the choir, and enriched our lives as a congregation.

And also came *Iglesia del Pueblo*, and the Korean Church, with whom we are growing to understand and enjoy as brothers and sisters in Christ.

My friends, this is not our own doing! As at Pentecost, things are coming loose, breaking open. Can it be the same wind of creation that swept across the waters, bringing something to life?

We know this: the church is no longer exclusively white middle-class. And I wonder:

- How will God continue to breathe and work in us to proclaim God's glory?
- How will the Holy Spirit create understanding among us with our different cultures and languages?
- And most important, how will we be touched by the tongues of fire, and respond?
- What will we learn? How will we differentiate between *phileo* – brotherly love, and *agape* – unconditional love, that might require us to give of ourselves sacrificially to another – especially among the people God has placed here in this room, and in our neighborhoods?

It is our privilege, honor -- and calling, to be a part of this phenomenon in the church in America today, to see beyond the every-day struggles to communicate and be assured that God is inspiring us to proclaim and be witnesses to the love of God, together.

The disciples in the room on the first day of Pentecost had gathered to pray and wait – they were not aware of the plans God had in store for them – and what a surprise it was!

It was a phenomenon of vast proportions

that set in motion a worldwide church movement in which we are still participating today.

We are the descendants of that day in Jerusalem, when there was little hope and much speculation about the future;

But God came into the room with infused, creative power unfurled, and transformed their doubts into hope.

God gave them the gift of *agape* love; that reached out to all nations. And all the men and women in that room spilled out into the streets and shared their incredible, life-changing experience with everyone they met. It was an event of contagious energy as the Spirit created a new life of mission within them. Today we respond to God's creative gifts to this church – to this room of expectant disciples who God has claimed to BE his church. We have become full participants in the miracles of God.

When we are living among the miracles in every day circumstances we often miss the importance or magnitude of the happenings around us. We might say, "This is an ordinary town – what good thing ever comes out of Las Cruces?" Indeed, didn't Nathanael ask the same question in Galilee regarding Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Philip answers, "Come and See."

When our granddaughter Sarah was a toddler, she would not accept Grandpa's invitation to go with her older brother and sister in the truck for a ride and to do something special, such as a trip to the book or toy store, or to lunch, or to buy an ice cream. Sarah was content to stay home with her mommy, where she felt secure.

But Steve knew that one day, Sarah would realize she was missing something by not going along to see a wider world. Finally, the day came. Steve invited Jack and Elizabeth to go with him; and little Sarah, standing there and suddenly feeling left out, said, "Papa, what about me?!"

These words, "What about Me?" from a toddler are expected and appropriate; but God did not envision the Church to be a place that asks, "What about Me?"

The disciples in Jerusalem had not yet learned *Agape* love and were wondering, "What will happen to ME?" Little did they know that they were about to be touched by the tongues of God's refining fire, transformed, and sent out into the world to be Apostles.

And the new Apostles would learn to ask, not "What about ME?" but

"What about US?" and "What about THEM?"

WE ARE THE CHURCH. Without its people, and its mission, the Church would not exist.

The Spirit of God is moving among us today, at Pentecost –
building our mission, one we are beginning to see clearly.

Hang on to your hats and clutch your skirts!

The Mighty Wind of Creation is stirring in this Sanctuary!

Let the Spirit soar within you, and come along for the ride!

AMEN