

REFLECTIONS ON AN UNTAMED GOD

Pentecost, May 19, 2013 Acts 2: 1-21

Today we celebrate Pentecost.

In ancient Israel, Pentecost was connected with the grain harvest.

The harvest began with Passover and lasted for 7 weeks,

beginning with the barley harvest & ending with the wheat harvest.

Growing up on a Kansas farm, that makes sense to me:

barley and oats always mature before wheat.

The 7 weeks or 49 days were considered a season of great gladness.

On the 50th day, there was a special temple celebration

when the farmers offered their harvest gifts to God in worship
with much pomp and circumstance.

Besides a celebration of harvest,

this was also a time of celebrating God's other gifts to them.

Passover, marking the beginning of harvest,

was also a time of remembering their slavery in Egypt

and how God had freed them from the hand of Pharaoh.

Pentecost, marking the end of harvest,

was a time of remembering how God gave them

the ten commandments—the law—at Mt. Sinai.

The tradition that grew up around the Mt. Sinai story

was that the law was given in seventy languages.

So worship on Pentecost conveyed the Jew's gratitude to God

both for the fruits of the field

and God's guidance throughout Jewish history—

leading them out of Egypt, through the wilderness,

until they came to Mt. Sinai and received the ten commandments.

It was a holiday with special decorations and meals,

worship, prayer, and all-night study of the scriptures.

So on Pentecost, 120 followers of Jesus

gathered to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost.

They were in Jerusalem worshipping and praying AND waiting

as Jesus had instructed.

It is possible they had been praying

and studying the scriptures all night.

And then suddenly everything explodes.
Wind blows through the room with a loud rushing sound.
Flames that looked like fire break appeared on everyone's head.
People begin speaking in many languages.
This is not the solemn worship of the temple,
 this is not worship that one tames and controls.
This is worship that is alive—
 the spirit blows where it wills,
 lights fire in the soul,
 and speaks from the depths of human emotion.
Things are really rolling!

What is going on here?
The God who came in smoke and fire and made a mountain shake
 to write the law on tablets of stone in 70 languages,
 is coming again with wind and fire and making the room shake.
The parallels, if they stopped to think about it,
 must have been striking.

Well, what WAS going on?
People responded different to that question.
What would YOUR response have been?
What IS your response when the spirit starts blowing things
 around a bit,
 and people get fired up about Jesus,
 and they start using new expressions of faith,
 and they are passionate about life.

I suspect our responses today
 would be as varied as theirs were over 2,000 years ago.
Some said, "What is the meaning of all this?"
Others quickly explained it away with a brush of their hand
 by saying, "They're just drunk."

Yes, it's easy to explain away things that touch our emotions
 in ways that leave us out of control.
We like a tame and domesticated God
 that makes us feel safe and secure.

We don't often choose a God
that blows us out of our comfort zone
and sets on fire our deepest emotions—
including our deepest fears.

When people could obey the law,
the emotions didn't need to be touched.
But this is something different.
God is asking for a new kind of relationship
that touches the heart.

It reminds me of the movie, "Castaway."
A survivor from an airplane wreck finds himself
alone on a small island.
For five years he survives with next to nothing.
One of the few things that washes ashore from the wreckage
is a Wilson volleyball.
The Wilson volleyball becomes the survivor's god—
the one to whom he pours out all his deepest desires and prayers .
Finally, the survivor builds a raft and sets out to sea,
but a huge wave blows Wilson overboard.
The survivor has to choose between retrieving the ball
or saving his life by returning to the safety of the raft.
However, while the survivor is grieving his loss,
a huge whale surfaces alongside the raft
and looks the survivor straight in the eye.
This is something much bigger than a volleyball.
This is something that cannot be controlled and manipulated.
The sea rolls where it wills.
The beasts of the ocean descend into the depths
and surface wherever and whenever they will.
Yes, something very, very big is going on.
And yet the flimsy raft floats carries the survivor
to the safety of an oceangoing ship.
No longer can the survivor rationally explain things away.
He has met forces much bigger than he and his little raft
and he has survived.
He no longer lives under the illusion that he can fix everything,
that he can control things, yet he is unafraid.

Yes, those 120 in the upper room that day
met something much bigger than they had ever imagined.
They were filled with the Spirit of a living, creative, moving God.
The covenant with God was no longer written on stone tablets,
but it was being written on the flesh of their hearts.
It was not a covenant of obedience, but of love.
But like I said, this isn't always comfortable.
So there were those who distanced themselves,
crossed their arms and explained it away.
They wanted a tame God, a volleyball God
who they could bounce and throw and catch at their will.

I don't know about you, but I understand these people well.
I'm good at crossing my arms and analyzing mystery away.
I think I know what God is about.
I think I know God's plans.
I think I know God's mind.
Who of us is not scared to death when we reach the limits of life
through illness or death?
Who of us is not scared to death when God invites us
to descend into the depths of emotional pain for healing?
Who of us is not scared to death when God invites us to go places
that we knew nothing about so we can stretch and grow?
Who of us is not scared to death when God fills us with desires & dreams
that don't fit into what other people think we should do?
This wind and fire can be explained away
by many rational arguments such as:
If I acknowledge the pain in myself or others,
I will have to look at it and deal with it.
I'm not smart enough or brave enough
to do new things or go new places.
If I follow an unknown path I'll make others uncomfortable
and I want to make everybody happy.
Besides I have many responsibilities.

Oh, yes, we cross our arms and explain away the wind and the fire
and the impassioned language
that reaches out to touch hungry hearts.

But there were those who didn't cross their arms on Pentecost Day.
They watched and wondered asked the question,
 "What does this mean?"
 WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

This question can only be asked when things blow into our lives
 and shake us up a bit.
When we understand that God is much bigger than we are.
We don't ask this question of a volleyball God.
We ask it when we are thrown around by an ocean
 an look into the eye of a whale that dives into the depths
 and jumps into the sun
 and blows a fountain of seawater in our face.

This is a God who dived into the depths of our human condition
 by coming to live among us in the person of Jesus.
This is the God who faced pain and death to set us free from it.
This is the God who raised Jesus from the dead
 and exalted him in heaven.
This is the God has come to make a new covenant with us.
Not one written on cold, unfeeling stone,
 but one that is written on the flesh and blood life of Jesus--
 one that is poured out into the world
 to be written in love even on the very flesh of our hearts.
This is the culmination of all God's covenants with us in the past.

Yes, we try to make God in our image.
But over 200 years ago, this God came into a room
 and distributed divine energy around the room.
Each persons had one had a flame like fire on his or her head.
Each one.
Each one was given a gift of language.
Each one was a vessel filled with the presence of the living Spirit.

And the flame rested equally on
 men and women,
 young and old,
 slave and free
 even all creation.

All are worthy vessels of God's living Spirit.

But again this draws us up short.

ALL?

There is a story in the last Mennonite World Review
of a former drug addict who graduated from seminary.
The Auca Indian church in the jungles of Ecuador
grew from natives who killed the first missionaries.
Chuck Colson brought healing and hope to many prisoners
after being a prisoner himself.

God's Spirit cannot be put into our boxes.
It is poured out on everyone who seeks.
It distributes gifts to everyone.
This is a God who speaks in all languages
and distributes gifts to all people.
It blows through rooms and the earth
until all creation is filled with the glory of God
and all people are touched by creating, transforming power.

What does this mean?

It means that God has made a new covenant with us.
Through the life and death of Jesus
the Spirit of God is poured out into the world
and into our lives.

This covenant is no longer written on stone,
but is written on the very flesh of our hearts.

We can cross our arms and explain it away.

Or we can humbly accept
that God is alive and ready to blow through our lives
with creative, restorative winds
of healing and transformation.

We can accept the cleansing flame
that burns up the chaff of our lives
and fills us with passion for love and living.

We can ponder in our hearts what God is doing,
what gifts have been given us,
how God is bringing us together,
and what kind of a people God wants to make us.

This morning we meet a powerful God
who is much bigger than either you or me,
who came into our world to become like us,
and now blows that love through our lives
with wind and fire and quickened tongues.

So “What does all this mean for me?”

What does it mean to love and follow Jesus?

What does it mean to obey God—

not because the law says we must law

but because we have been touched by love?

Let us dare to ask the question to whatever we cannot understand,

“What does this mean?”

Let us uncross our arms

and open them to embrace mystery and love.