

Sermon – Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

May 31, 2020

“Visions...Dreams...Wonders...Signs”

On October 8, 1956, 12 year old Leith Anderson boarded a subway from his home in Bloomfield, New Jersey for the Bronx, New York, along with his dad, who'd scooped up a couple of tickets for that afternoon's baseball game between their beloved Brooklyn Dodgers and the Yankees. He was excited, since a win would mean his team would have a chance the next day to claim the World Series title for the second straight year. In a conversation he had some years later with a man who he described as a “walking baseball almanac” Leith described his disappointment about that day - that at the very first big-league game he ever attended not only did his team lose – not a single Dodger player got on base.

The man said, “*you were there...you were at the only perfect game ever pitched in a World Series?*” “*Yeah*”, Mr. Anderson deadpanned...” *but...uh...we lost!*”! Only then did he realize that he had been so caught up in his team's defeat that he missed the fact he was a witness to baseball history. How often does that happen to us – we get so caught up in the negative, in the defeats and challenges in our lives that we miss what God is doing through them, even aiding us to overcome them and be better in the wake of them? In our story from Acts, it is clear many people missed what was going on. The disciple's reaction to their being filled with the Holy Spirit, as Jesus had promised them only 10 days earlier is not recorded. Clearly Peter seized the moment and preached if not a perfect sermon – one that was pretty darn close.

What is recorded is the reaction of many of the Jews in Jerusalem – some assuming the disciples were drunk, others – amazed but perplexed simply wondered aloud “*what does this mean.*” They had no idea evidently that history was being made in their presence. We mark again this day an event in history not seen before or since – last week the Ascension of our Lord, this week the return of our Lord, on Pentecost, in the person of the Holy Spirit. And amazingly many still wonder what does it mean – what could it possibly mean to have God indwell us– to be people for whom it can truly be said, as Jesus himself said in John 17:23 – “*I in them and you in me. Maybe they brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them – even as you have loved me.*”

You are, if you are a baptized Christian, a Spirit-filled person. You have the forgiving, sanctifying Holy Spirit in you. What does this mean? For Peter, it meant that a guy who only weeks earlier could do little more than mumble convenient denials that he even knew Jesus, so as to protect himself, could preach Jesus crucified and risen with conviction and power of the sort he would have scarcely imagined possible. It meant that Peter, through the Holy Spirit, could latch onto an obscure passage from the Old Testament prophet Joel about what God would do in the last days of history – bringing the Jewish people to Jerusalem, all of them, making them loom large over their enemies and prep them for an blessed, everlasting rule in what they called “*the messianic kingdom of God.*”

By quoting Joel, Peter said this kingdom had arrived. In it, God would give young men visions, old men dreams, women would join them in speaking on God’s behalf, wonders and signs would testify to its presence. In our lesson, those signs and wonders sound ominous, not welcoming. But there’s a reason for that – the judgement of God was often portrayed in the Bible with images of fire – think Sodom and Gomorrah for example, and in the temple in Jerusalem, when on it’s altars animal sacrifices for the sins of the Jewish people were consumed - blood, fire, and billows of smoke were an almost daily occurrence.

So the story sounds like one of judgement, and as a matter of first importance, our sin is confronted by the Holy Spirit – the conscience that nags you, reminds you how touchy and petty you can be and prods you to change is proof that the Holy Spirit is at work in you – pointing you to Jesus your forgiver. But what else does Pentecost mean? The signs of the times right now are ominous too. No one really welcomes this – unless you’re a vaccine maker I suppose. Pentecost’s story has often been associated with the last book of the Bible – Revelation. There, all sorts of signs are offered about the coming of the Lord in judgement, and most are scary. But Revelation is also a very hopeful book.

Time and again it speaks of the faith of the church inspired by the Holy Spirit and demonstrates how the church and it’s people press on, overcome, and prove that God is not a remote, distant deity but a personal and engaged God. The book of Revelation is a testament to the Holy Spirit like no other. When in it the suffering of people is described whether for their faith in Christ or simply by virtue of the fallen nature of our world, it is God through the Holy Spirit and the church that healing comes. In a pandemic, suffering is indiscriminate.

But we know suffering also picks some targets with more ferocity. We know that anyone's lungs can get infected at any moment, but we know that old lungs and illness weakened lungs which are often also the lungs of the poor, particularly in our cities and particularly among African Americans, are a principal target.

Now, we are hearing about a "second wave" of suffering, even as the first seems to have energy left. This second is aiming at people who suffer with addictions and people who live with mental illness. Isolation and loss of income weigh harder on some minds than others, and the much dreaded "spikes" of this pandemic are now occurring in the form of overdoses and suicides – often one in the same. They are fearful signs – not welcome ones. The prophesying – the speaking on God's behalf that this year's Pentecost calls forth may be to cross the cultural, economic and racial lines between healthy and sick, wealthy and poor, and bring Jesus' prayed for "unity" of the Father and the Son, the Son and the church into full view.

The church is not perfect – you and I, as Luther says, "sin every day and deserve nothing but punishment." But the church and its people have the Holy Spirit, the forgiver and sanctifier, and if Pentecost means anything it means that dreams and visions are part of our giftedness and pursuing them expected of us. If you have the means – I urge you to release the love Jesus prayed his church would know and show - that you in gratitude for your health or wealth might mean someone's sickness and need is met and cured.

What a sign and wonder to the world if the church spoke like that with a unified voice. How many people might listen to our message of salvation in Jesus through the forgiveness of sins in his name if we first spoke a language of compassion and sacrificial love like that? As I was preparing this message, I thought about how wonderful it would be if God would send another "Pentecost" to us. Then it dawned on me – the Holy Spirit is even now saying "*I'm ready when you are - go right ahead – I'll be with you and empower you every step of the way.*"

It may interest you to know – it did me anyway, that the man responsible for the only World Series perfect game in baseball history – that "disappointing loss" a young Leith Anderson described, was a kid from Michigan City, Indiana named Don Larson – who was anything but a perfect pitcher for most of his 14-year career. In fact, his "numbers" were pretty mediocre. He lost more games than he won, was traded 11 times, and walked almost as many batters as he struck out.

But when he died on January 1 of this year at the age of 90, the stories poured in from people who claimed to have seen or listened to that “perfect game” of his, describing it as one of their most cherished, vivid memories.

I know it is a lofty vision I’m presenting you today –you might think I’m dreaming if I think the church could have an effect on the world like I’ve just described. But if your gonna dream, Pentecost seems like the time to do it – because Pentecost presents a vision of the church that can bring the world to Christ, and Christ to the world. That the Spirit would so embolden us again, let us ever pray... AMEN