

"Our Birth Story"

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Acts 2: 1-18, 43-47
(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville)

Last week, Bill and I offered a reflection where each of us shared a few words that summed up our experience of ministry.

I want to take that notion as our jumping off point today, for we have just heard the story about the birthday of the church, and in that story there are some incredible words that we, as a people of faith, are invited to carry in our hearts and live into our experience.

Think about what it might have been like to have been there at the beginning. Each and every person with their own birthday candle. Imagine it, all the sizes and shapes, the faces and forms, appearing as if everybody was sprouting their own dancing tongue of flame.

Just like fireworks bursting in a nighttime sky, the first glimpse of the church was spectacular. Like the first birth cries of a newborn, the first sounds of the church speaking to the world are riveting. The story has had the power to stir our imaginations and ignite our hearts ever since.

It didn't start out that way though. The disciples, not just the original eleven; you have to understand that there were women, children, by-standers, the curious, the sceptical, the reluctant, and the newly converted there as well. They were all together, locked away, scared and unsure about the future. They had no direction. They lacked any idea of whom or what they might be now that Jesus was gone. They were terrified.

But then, the wind started to swirl, and the people started to speak in each other's languages, and it appeared as if tongues of fire were literally dancing right out of their heads. The most incredible thing about that day though, was that God offered a brand new set of words to the world. The miraculous speeches not only broke down dividing walls, so that people from different regions could be understood just as they could understand, but Peter gave the very first sermon to the church. It was a reminder that God had told them that this day would come. The world would discover a new way to be, women and men equal, people offering vision and hope, no one enslaved to the past.

Those life changing words have kept coming. The promise we have inherited is that we are told that we'll be given the words we need, not only to find our place in the world, but also words to speak to deepest need, and tell of our strength and convey our hope. We have been given the words that are meant to support and help one another. We have been given the most incredible good news to share.

That is the birth story we have inherited. In the same way families retell the events of each loved one's arrival, usually with a whole lot of dramatic embellishment, the church uses this story to remind us about the language of origin and the language of call. Where did I come from? Where am I headed in my life? What in the world, am I being called to?

One word we are given from the Pentecost story is awe. I have had the opportunity to hold newly born babies, some only six or eight hours old. It's a feeling beyond description. I remember holding my nephew for the first time. Awe, astonishment, wonder. Can you remember when you held a newborn baby, and you whispered welcome into their ear? "Welcome to the world. We have been waiting for you. We are so glad you're here." You look at those tiny hands, those toes so perfectly formed. You see the scrunched up face. Awe comes when we recognize the preciousness and sacredness of life. There are things in this world that will take your breath away. There are things that will leave you speechless. Life and joy, sadness and fear, sickness, pain, ending. Make room for wonder in your life. Make a space for the things that leave you speechless. Allow room for the unexpected.

Another word we are given as part of our birth story is companionship. Notice that once the disciples had the experience of Pentecost, they were like peas and carrots, able to share every piece of each other's lives. We are told that they combined their possessions and goods. They ate together. They worshipped together. There was no regard for the discriminatory customs of the day. They were given each other. They were given companions for the journey.

The word companionship comes from two other words: "com" meaning "with", and "panis" meaning "bread". The church became larger and stronger every day because they sat side by side at the table, breaking bread with one another.

This act of accompaniment and sharing gave them the power to conquer the world's deepest hunger.

On Friday, when I was writing this sermon, someone who lives a very marginal life and who comes to our Out of the Cold dinner program, came in to tell me that she was feeling grateful that day. She comes in every couple of weeks, and she asks me to pray for her family. Her son is doing better. He has found some occasional work. He is able to have some visitation time with his daughter. And this woman tells me she is sleeping better and she has made a friend. Now she has a place to visit, someone to share coffee. She is grateful for companionship, and thanks to you being here in the downtown, she has a place to come and people who remind her that she is important and she matters.

Today, people are so lonely. The other night, I was listening to a report that said the excessive use of people using social media, like facebook, is not bringing people together, as we so often hear. A recent study says that technology is making people more isolated. Stories of loneliness and isolation are on the rise. Hospitalizations for depression and deep sadness are skyrocketing, especially among our youth. You just have to look around. I was stopped at a light the other day and I noticed that each person waiting for a bus there was scrolling their phone. No one was talking. I see it all the time in restaurants, people eating together but not talking together.

But we have another story to tell. Our birth story reminds us that we are given friends who come together for worship, for sharing the bread and for service. As our creed tells us, "We are not alone." Those have got to be the most powerful words I know. The Spirit brings life

and hope. Out of the darkness and distress of the world, gaps between rich and poor, disease, unrest, growing intolerance of any opinion or ideal other than our own, we celebrate glimpses of the work of the spirit that is bringing people together, making points of connection along the way, and creating a new way of belonging.

Another word we are given is enabling. With the Spirit of God, those first disciples were enabled to leave that locked up room and go out into the world. Their job was huge: bring God's word to a big world. Each of us could tell a piece of the story of just how we have seen it happen. I am convinced that it's not seen in the flashy and flamboyant ways. Flash doesn't leave much of an impression.

I see it happening when people take small, important steps. We are given chances to listen and try to understand. We are given chances to have our preconceptions and our fears cast aside. We are given chances to get to know our neighbours. We are given chances and opportunities to make the world better. It's like ripples on water, to see ourselves as a widening circle of possibility.

There are many other words in this story, like understanding, courage, guidance, relationship, and whatever words you use, the story is the same. It's a story of how life is changed when we encounter Jesus Christ again.

A pastor tells her piece of the story: She was being arrested along with other protestors for speaking up about unfair labour practices in the lobby of a Washington building recently. Just before they were arrested, the pastor and a few of her friends started to sing hymns together. She was taken alone in a paddy wagon. The policeman assigned to guard her spoke to her through a narrow window, and he actually apologized for her undignified treatment and he expressed sorrow that he had to be the one to enforce the rules.

The pastor asked him why he was a policeman if he hated the work so much.

"Oh, I just fell into it, I guess. I came out of the army, and this seemed a good career. I can retire in two years, and I'm still young," he said.

He went on: "But I what I wanted to say to you, was that back there, when you guys were singing Amazing Grace, in that federal building, I liked that. I liked the way your voices sounded when you sang those songs. I just wanted you to know."

The pastor thanked the man.

"You'll get out of here soon," he said.

"So will you," the pastor replied.

The Pentecost story is offered to all people who find themselves in places that are not all that satisfying. It is a story given to people who yearn to hear something else. Because of God's spirit, nudging weary hearts, we hear this as an invitation to life. We can welcome the Spirit and in our moments of awe, in our times of connection, when we are enabled to make a difference, our lives can be transformed.

It is knowing with a deep conviction that we can make a world of difference every day of the week. In the sharing of our resources, in the ways we speak of our abundance, we can indeed change the world. Through the decisions we make in the marketplace and the workplace, through the power of our purse and our political will, we can change the world.

Christ has no body but ours. As the church today, we are called into life. We are the ones God's spirit is igniting and empowering. We are the ones who bring the good news. We are the ones called to care for this world and the people we call neighbours. Light bearers. Hope holders. Friends. Servants. Called to live extravagantly in the world.

May it be so, my friends, may it be so.

Let us pray:

Spirit alive within and among us, we offer you our living. Make us aware of your deepest desires and hopes for us, for our families, for the world, for this church, for the earth our home.

Help us to hear the new story you are bringing to birth. Most of all, shine your light through us. We offer our grateful thanks and praise. Amen.