

## **“Re-Birthing the Church”**

I Corinthians 12:4-31; Acts 2:1-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 31, 2020

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open ourselves to the extraordinary work of your Holy Spirit in our midst. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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Isn't it funny how “stay-at-home” orders make you see things you hadn't seen before? I've been preaching the story of Pentecost from Acts 2 for 18 years now, and I've never before noticed this: there's a glaring narrative gap right there at the beginning of the story. “They were all together in one place,” it says. “A sound like the rush of a violent wind ... filled the entire house where they were sitting.”

But the next thing you know, the disciples are speaking about God's deeds of power in all sorts of languages, and a crowd is gathering from all over town. Are we supposed to believe all those people squeezed into the room where the disciples were at the beginning of the story? No, I believe the implication is clear: the disciples had left the building. Was it the smoke that accompanied those tongues of fire, or was it the intensity of their sudden need to share the good news that made them get up off their seats and scatter into the streets? Maybe it was both! But when the Holy Spirit arrived and took hold, the church could no longer remain in the building.

Now you might think that this would mean we'd have been more than prepared for Pentecost to arrive this year, since we left the building over two months ago. But that's not how it feels, is it? Pentecost has come, and I'm feeling more

terrified of fire than I have been for a long time. I don't feel empowered; I feel exhausted. There are so many voices clamoring to be heard, so many gaping wounds crying out for care, so many dangers, so many risks to calculate. All I want the Holy Spirit to bring me is a nap, but I'm pretty sure that's not how it works. As Peter said, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." So let us stay here a moment, opening ourselves to the wind and flame despite our weariness and fear, and see what the story of Pentecost can offer us.

One of the weirdest things about this story is that really, really long list of all the different people and places and languages in which folks were hearing about God's deeds of power. That list didn't need to be that long. The opening sentence could have made the point: "there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem." But that's not how the story is told. The writer insists on listing everyone they can think of, covering multiple continents. Why do you suppose that is? What is the point being driven home here? The lesson I am hearing today from that ridiculously long list is that the good news sounds different to different people and that we're not always going to understand the good news as it is heard by others. And that is the foundational reality of being the church.

So what would it mean for us to trust the Holy Spirit in this moment? If God is trying to birth the church anew in this moment, what could it mean for us to accept the idea that we may not understand the good news as others are hearing it? What

could it mean for us to recognize that, despite that lack of understanding, despite those barriers of perspective and experience, we are one church, one body? It has become clear that we have been thrust into an opportunity to learn to be church differently, on so many levels. The thing that God is doing here is too big to be contained within our buildings. It's too big for just one language or only one perspective. This good news doesn't have just one narrative. There are four gospels in our Bible alone; how many more are there within the ranks of God's people? What does it mean to trust the Holy Spirit in this moment, to help us hear one another's stories and pain and fears and hopes? What does it mean for the church to break beyond our walls, to bring hope to a charred and hurting community? How can we prophesy hope in the face of blood and fire and smoky mist?

There is so much raw pain in La Mesa this morning. And not just in La Mesa, but all throughout our county and our nation. Part of what is so shocking for some, I'm guessing, is how clearly the destruction that happened in downtown La Mesa last night showed that our beloved little "Jewel of the Hills" is no exception to all the ugliness we've been watching in tv for years. There is comfort in thinking that even though things are bad "out there", our community would never fall that low, to imagine it would never happen here. But now it has, and the destruction is hard to comprehend. There is a desire to find someone to blame, some way of pushing the ugliness back where it belongs, far away from us. But there is a reason La Mesa

became the focal point of protest for the whole county last night. The pain and agony re-inflicted on the nation by the cold-blooded killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on Monday was heightened here by the abusive behavior of a La Mesa police officer toward a young black man on Wednesday. Peaceful protesters from all over the county, including La Mesa, came to bear witness to all of it, some of them more in control of their emotions than others. They were not met with any understanding or willingness to listen or dialogue. They were shot with tear gas, rubber bullets, and metal bean bags. And as the night progressed, some of the protesters were joined by others with agendas more focused on violence and destruction, such that we awoke to buildings reduced to ashes and piles of broken glass. Our city will never be the same. A woman was taken to the hospital after being shot at close range in the eye with a metal bean bag. Here, in La Mesa. Tear gas flowed like a toxic marine layer, into the windows of apartments and homes near the area. Businesses that families have given years of their lives to had their windows smashed in and their inventory wrecked and stolen. A few buildings burned to the ground. It's a hard time to look for joy in the power of flames.

But what would it look like if we could trust the Holy Spirit to guide us through this moment? If we could open our raw and weary hearts to this thing God has drug the church out of the building for? If we could somehow, some way – after a nap and a good cry maybe – consider the possibility of re-birth that is being offered? La Mesa

will never be the same. Let us pray the church will never be the same again either. How can we help our community understand that as not simply a tragedy, but an opportunity? How can we slow our breath down to match the sustaining wind of the Holy Spirit that helps us hear the stories of those people whose good news we didn't understand before? How can we help our neighbors – all of our neighbors, no exceptions – listen to one another's stories? We may still not understand why some people do what they do or say what they say. But when we open our hearts to one another's humanity – honoring others' truths and fears and hopes and pain as just as worthy as our own – the Holy Spirit pours out healing power.

Will you pray with me? *Holy God, we are weary and grieving. The rage and pain that have overcome our community, from so many directions, have wrought destruction beyond our believing. It is hard to imagine what comes next. It is hard to see how reconciliation could be possible. We confess that this reckoning has only just begun, and so we call upon your Holy Spirit to empower us for the next part of this journey. You have called us out of the building, O God. Prepare us for what is next. Open our hearts to receive even what we do not understand. Be with us in our grief and transform it into a connection point with others who are suffering, rather than a motivation for mounting defenses. Help us to trust in the Holy Spirit of your Risen Christ, that we might be the church re-born. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*