Acts 2:1-4; Romans 8:22-27 | Joy: New Creation | Pentecost

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Being made new is joyful when one desires it, but if you are content with how you are, or if you are not yet ready, being made new is anything but joyful.

It is often painful. And frustrating. Isolating. As a friend once told me - change is what happens to us and progress is what we do together. Becoming a new creation means that the old life is gone and a new life has begun. But what was so bad about the old life? Why can’t I hold on to that which was? This new life is unknown and strange and nebulous and…and yet. This new life comes whether we ask for it or not, whether we seek it or not, whether we pray for it or not. This new life comes because creation is eagerly longing to be made new always.

When the people gathered together on that birth day of the church, on Pentecost, they were not there because it was Pentecost. The church did not yet exist. The disciples were still awash in a strange mixture of grief and relief, of anticipation and worry. Their group was new, too, having lost Judas and gained Matthias. It was what we call a liminal time - a time betwixt and between - dynamic, gray, not yet but still becoming. But - even in the midst of the mystery - the apostles held fast to what they knew and what was good: gathering together, worshipping God, listening for the Word.

And so, they joined the faithful for a festival called Shavuot. Shavuot is the holiday in Judaism celebrating the giving of God’s Word on Mt. Sinai. It was - and still is - a joyous day, marked by all-night Torah study and singing, by reveling in the revelation of Holy Writ. They were gathering in the ways they had before, with the traditions and the structures and beautiful rituals they had always known. And the Spirit showed up. Which is to say that the Spirit shows up where we are. In whatever we are doing. Even if it is something we’ve always done. The Spirit shows up.

And when the Spirit showed up...the Spirit showed up. There was no way that one could ignore Her. Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Did the hair on their arms stick straight up or did a chill snake down their spines? Did their hearts flutter in recognition of the One who formed them in their mother’s wombs? Did their ears tingle at the sound? Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. Their mouths were filled with words never known yet instantly familiar and personal. The fire did not consume them yet burned with fury and fervor.

I wonder if this felt like change...or progress. I wonder if it was welcomed or so frightening that the disciples shook because they knew that nothing would be the same from now on. I wonder if they
rejoiced because Christ’s promise came loud and clear or if they worried because now - now it meant they had to do something with this Pentecostal gift. The Spirit was loose and there was no turning back - not for them and not for all those who gathered in Christ’s name from that moment forward.

Presbyterians like to put fancy Latin words - well, fancy to me because I can’t read Latin beyond this phrase - with this concept of ever-changing, ever-growing in the Spirit’s presence, especially in the context of the church. We say Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda which means ‘the church reformed, always reforming,’ according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. The theologian Anna Case-Winters reminds us that “Our Reformed motto, rightly understood, challenges both the conservative and the liberal impulses that characterize our diverse church today. It does not bless either preservation for preservation’s sake or change for change’s sake.” Instead, it challenges us to remember that 1) we - individually and collectively - are in need of growth always and forever because we are not yet what we shall be and 2) we serve, worship, and glorify a Living God who is ever at work and thanks be, not done with us - and the church - yet. Case-Winters goes on to say that this heritage of being reformed, of rallying around our motto Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, “… invites us, as people who worship and serve a living God, to be open to being “re-formed” according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.”

Invited to be re-formed, made new creations, participants in the Good News being born through our Living God again and again...

Invited to pay attention to the Spirit in rushing, violent wind or quiet, still small voice...

The first session report of our church made to the Savannah Presbytery was March 22, 1896. Looking back at our archives this week, our church made regular reports to the presbytery, answering a set of standardized questions that must have been asked of each congregation. And the third question - after asking about the fidelity of church leadership and attendance - was always “Special outpouring of the Holy Ghost?” Answer? None. Months later? None. And after that? None. Then - in 1909, something shifted. “The presence of the spirit has been manifest.” What changed? How did they see it now and not then?

Sometimes, it is obvious - those years saw church growth - a new building, new members, the building up of a Sunday school program. Women organized missions and there was steady leadership by pastors and elders.

Sometimes, though, it takes years to see it. Years to understand what the Spirit was up to. Beloved saint Virginia Russell knew it, too. I spent time this week rereading her gift to the church - A Century of

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1 https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/ecclesia-reformata/
Presbyterianism in Bulloch County. She noticed what I noticed, too - these gaps of when the church didn’t think the Spirit was present or offering a particularly “special” outpouring. These are her words from the PPS - Post Personal Script when she talks about the frequency of the answer “none” when asked about the “special outpouring of the Holy Ghost:” “I asked myself, was this really true? How did the session interpret the Holy Spirit?”

Sometimes, we need other people to show us the joy of the Spirit among us, birthing us into new creations. We get nostalgic or disquieted or frustrated. We want the church to be everything when it never can be nor never shall be because it is a human institution - a Spirit-filled institution but also filled with a whole bunch of human-ness. We get antsy if too many things shift at once or we pull away if we think we’re being left behind. We need other people to show us the joy of the Spirit - the joy of that first Pentecost day when the disciples knew - yes, everything is changing and yes, yes, yes, we are not alone. Not now and not ever. The Spirit chose to come to the community of gathered disciples so that there was no doubt that they were united in this new creation; there was no doubt that the Spirit was on the loose; there was no doubt that they were called to be the body of believers together, united, not alone.

The Spirit still chooses and generously so to come to this community of gathered disciples. Do you see this special outpouring? Can you interpret it?

- Of phone calls and texts and cards and casseroles not because of obligation but out of the love we knew first from Christ and cannot help but share with you.
- Of children laughing and rolling on the ground and bringing holy noise as a reminder that Christ said welcome the little children.
- Of showing up in the darkness of grief and death and depression, holding the light of Christ as a guide through the shadowed valley.
- Of music taking us to the highest heights and joining our voices with the faithful of every time and place.
- Of the laying on of hands in times of sickness, ordination, and commissioning, reminding us that we are not alone.
- Of water and wine poured out as visible signs of an invisible grace.
- Of vows made here in this sanctuary and lived out in the world.
- Of meals served and backpacks packed and clothing placed upon chilled backs.

Pouring out, pouring out.

And yet - thanks be - the Spirit is not finished. Not finished with you, with me, or with us. Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda. Amen.

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