

Pentecost 2021 – May 23, 2021
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Spectacle, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, senior minister (preached remotely prerecorded and edited due to the ongoing social restraints caused by Covid-19)

Based on Acts. 2.1-18

As it turns out, God is not above orchestrating a spectacle. God is not afraid of flourish and display, of color and sound, of instigating pizzazz. Let me count the ways:

- A covenant in the form of an iridescent rainbow arching across an azure sky
- A blazing bush that is not consumed
- A plague of frogs, thick and sticky
- Flakey discs of manna from heaven
- Fiery prophets hurling sharp, well aimed words
- Lot's wife turned to a pillar of salt (Don't look back)
- A bright star in the East pointing the way
- A babe in a stable
- A full-on solar eclipse as Jesus breathes his last

God, it appears, favors a little well-timed razzle dazzle now and again for the purpose of getting our attention, turning us from ourselves toward each other and toward the moral imaginations to which God calls us...for which God designed us.

Pentecost is just such a display of razzle dazzle. Pentecost a microburst of wind, fire, speech and understanding. It causes a commotion. Turns heads. Inspires a hullabaloo ... a thronging and flocking of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and Libya, not to mention Romans, Cretans and Arabs. Which is to say, the Pentecostal microburst causes a stir and incites a great gathering, a curious throng of foreigners and locals. It's an event...a wonderment.

The day of Pentecost didn't start that way. It started out unobtrusively, indoors and insular. Just the followers of Jesus, Galileans, family really, neighbors ...gathered for a Jewish holiday. Gathered for some praying and eating and storytelling. It begins indoors and insular, but it explodes, expands and spills over and out into the streets, into the city, into the view and hearing of, well, pretty much everybody.

The crowds that gather... all those Parthians and Medes and Elamites ...it is reported that as they encounter this windy, fiery, speechifying hullabaloo they are bewildered, amazed, astonished and perplexed. At what? Well, these Cappadocians and Phrygians and Pamphylans all speak different languages and dialects. Yet in this microburst, they all understand the Galileans who are speaking their own native language, a Galilean dialect of Aramaic. This eruption, this noisy, fiery, windy outburst is a linguistic breakthrough, a revolution of understanding, of cross-cultural, interreligious comprehension.

Pentecost was an event. A happening. A crowd-drawing, jaw-dropping, eye-popping, neck-craning, head-cocking spectacle. The Christian church, born that day, was born in a spectacle.

God is not above a little attention getting spectacle; certainly not for its own sake, not for the sake of razzle dazzle. God employs spectacle for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of love, for the sake of communication and comprehension. For the sake of surprising and delighting us with Gospel.

Across the centuries Old South Church has adopted and sought to mimic such divine, attention getting, head-turning tactics for the sake of a greater message and meaning. For instance:

- throwing open the doors to the Meeting House and turning it into a recruiting station for the Union Army; thus declaring to all the world whose side we were on;
- draping the pulpit in black mourning felt in the wake of Abraham Lincoln's assassination;
- hauling a great bell, a 2000 pound noise-maker 245 feet up into the Tower to serve as our outdoor voice, peeling and tolling;
- Bill Adams and Kay Davis planting themselves outside the front door with signs reading, "Free Hugs".

The banners, flags and signs we design and display outside are meant to do the same, create a stir, provoke thought, send a message:

- Jesus didn't turn people away, neither do we
- Love your (Muslim) neighbor as yourself
- Black Lives Matter
- Climate Justice is Racial Justice

Colorful. Bold. Head turning. Attention getting. Provocative...for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of proclaiming and invoking the love and justice of Jesus.

I was in front of the church the other day, soaking in the warm sun when two women, early twenty's, walked by. They paused before our rainbow colored BE THE CHURCH sign. It reads: "Be the church. Love God. Embrace diversity. Fight climate change. Forgive often. Reject racism. Empower the powerless. Share earthly and spiritual resources. Enjoy this life." Having read the sign the two young women looked at each other, eyes wide, and said in unison: "I'd go to *that* church!"

That sign is Pentecostal. It provokes surprise and delight...sometimes anger and dismissal. It is colorful and connective and stimulating. It conveys news, good news, Gospel. It isn't what is expected of "religious people" in an old stone building. It is spirited, relational, prophetic, communicative, full of hope and grace and truth-telling.

The Marathon Scarf Project was Pentecostal. The Annual Blessing of the Marathon Athletes is Pentecostal. The recent installation of Peace Cranes; that was Pentecostal. Our traveling soup kitchens are Pentecostal, as are our blooming gardens, our occasional outdoor worship

services, and our annual promenade to the statue of Phillis Wheatley bearing signs wishing her a happy birthday from her church family.

Like the Galilean followers of Jesus who gathered on Pentecost we, too, most often gather indoors for our praying and eating, our story telling and visiting. We gather as family. That is as it should be. But unless and until what we do together in here spills out and over into the streets of Boston and into the wide world – and seeps out into the internet and social media – unless and until what we do in here spills out into the world, we are not the Pentecostal people God devised two centuries ago on the day of Pentecost.

We need your help. We produce a lot of material, Pentecostal postings on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, twitter. We need your help in amplifying our message, spilling it out to proclaim to all the world the news of our wide open door, our roomy theology, our God is more-grace-than-judgment theology, our anti-hierarchical, anti-patriarchal, priesthood of all believers theology, our embrace of science, our emphasis on incarnating the love and justice of Jesus, here and now, in this world (and leaving heaven up to God). This church's generous, grace-filled theology is a too well-kept secret. We need your help to cause a stir, turn heads, rouse the public to the God we have encountered in sacred text and living story.

God is not above orchestrating some well-timed pizzazz. God is not afraid of flourish and display, of color and sound, of attention getting spectacle. Indeed, God uses these to great effect. So should we.

If you believe in the promise of such Pentecostal spectacles ...then support us, pray for us, volunteer with us, join us, and use your thumbs to post and spread the news, the great good news, the spectacular, colorful, surprising, head-turning, jaw-dropping gospel news of the love and justice of Jesus. Will you join us? Do you dare?

Happy Pentecost, church!

BENEDICTION

May the God of Pentecost, of rainbow and blazing bush, of solar eclipse and shining star, shine upon us, and be gracious unto us.

May God give us grace never to sell ourselves short;
grace to risk something big for something good;
grace to remember that the world now is too dangerous
for anything but truth,
and too small for anything but love.

So, may God take our minds and think through them;
may God take our lips and speak through them,
may God take our hearts and set them on fire.