

*Improvisational God*

**Acts 2.1-21**

**Pentecost, May 31, 2020**

**First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL**

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

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When I was an undergrad at the University of North Carolina I took a jazz appreciation class, thinking that it would be an easy ‘A’. As it turned out, it wasn’t. On the positive side, though, I actually learned something about how to listen to jazz and understand what was going on--which I think may have been the point of the class.

It was fascinating to realize that, when the musicians took off on their solos, they weren’t just playing a bunch of random notes—which is what it had sounded like to my uneducated ear. No, they were actually taking the basic theme of the piece and developing it in different directions—following the progression of chords, but playing different notes in those chords. Or playing the original melody, but altering the rhythm.

The other thing that was happening is that they were listening intently to one another, so that what each of them did in their own solos was shaped by what others in the group had done in theirs. And usually, after each of the musicians had taken a turn doing their own improvisation, they would all return, together, to that first, recognizable theme—a theme that the listener could now hear in a whole different way, because of the various interpretations that had just been shared.

I think about that when I hear the passage from Acts, about what happened when the Holy Spirit landed on the church on that first Pentecost. The disciples were all together in one place, when suddenly the Spirit came in like wind, like fire, like flames dancing over their heads, and they were swept out into the street and started telling about how God had acted powerfully in this world, in their lives-- and all around them, people understood. People from all over. People who were strangers to Jerusalem, who were strangers to the Aramaic language of those first disciples, who were strangers to the customs of that place—yet they all understood, as though the disciples had been speaking their native languages. Somehow, the different disciples were finding different ways of communicating the same basic theme, so that all sorts of different people could understand.

When those first disciples went streaming out into the street, communicating the story of God's grace in all those languages, they couldn't have done that effectively if they hadn't first been listening to those languages. They had to have been listening to the stories of those others. Paying attention to their plight. Otherwise, their words would have made no sense, and they would have had no credibility with their listeners. Like a jazz combo in which every

musician is just doing their own thing, while paying no attention to one another, it would simply have been a bunch of noise.

These days, we have new ways of listening. With Zoom and YouTube, Twitter and Instagram and Facebook and an untold number of other platforms, we have been hearing, in recent years, voices that were once silenced. We've been given glimpses into lives and experiences that we never might have imagined—especially if we are white, and middle-or-upper middle class, with American citizenship.

This week, in particular, on social media and on the streets of this nation's cities, there are people shouting to be heard. Shouting to be understood and taken seriously. And while the church's message was new when those first disciples shared it, the church is old enough now that most people have heard the message it has to tell of God's love and grace that makes us all one family—but after centuries of many parts of the church refusing to change our tune to include the powerless and the marginalized, centuries of drowning out their pain, and even actively contributing to their oppression, our words to them are just “blah, blah, blah.”

Have we, now, begun to listen? Have we started paying attention to the frustration and pain and anger of people who, for 500 years have felt the knee of this nation pressing into their necks until they can't breathe?

If we have, if we have listened to the chord progressions of their lament until we can follow without a false note; if we have absorbed the rhythm of their longings until we can join in without trying to take over the song; then the Spirit is ready to sweep in and push us out into the streets—perhaps figuratively, in these days of pandemic and violence, but pushing us, nonetheless, onto the information superhighway and into the halls of power to add our voices, our resources, and every instrument at our disposal to amplify the cries for justice, and penetrate the walls and understanding of those who would never listen to them, but who might just listen to us.

Just like those first disciples, we are called to be a bridge of understanding, so that Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Minnesota and Colorado and Alabama—can finally hear and understand one another. And so that we can get to the point where the whole human race is finally singing the same theme—God's theme—of grace and mercy, of justice and peace, of humankindness and belonging.

It's a theme, deep down, that we all share. The yearning to belong. All of us want to feel connected to other human beings. To feel that others hear and understand what we have to say. And, deep down, all of us also want to feel connected to God. We want to feel that our story is somehow connected to God's story—that we're not just random people in a random universe, but that our existence has real meaning. That God hears us and understands us, and that our lives matter. That they matter to God.

The good news we have to share is that they do. That every life matters to God. Particularly the lives that seem not to matter to anyone else.

Why else did God choose to come, not as an emperor or as part of some master race, but as the child of a people in poverty, in oppression, on the margins of history.

And God has improvised every kind of way imaginable to communicate that deep love to us—from birdsong and whale song that fill us with wonder; to the pillar of fire that guided the enslaved to freedom; to the cross on which we see God's own arms spread wide for all the world; to a tomb standing open and empty, so that life, not death gets to play the final chord.

God's theme, is a joyful song of victory, but it isn't just for some. It's for all of us. And until all people are able to join in, as equals, we'll just be mangling the tune.

So, may the same Spirit who moved those first disciples out into the street move in and through and among us today, tuning our ears and empowering our voices—because the time for silence is over. We aren't an audience to this concert—we have to be part of the band.

And whether you are a walking bass or a saxophone or a trap set, God's spirit is upon us all, and it's time for every son and daughter of us to prophesy in our own way, so that we can be heard through the blood and darkness, calling all people, all people, *all* people, to join in God's great song of salvation.