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Plymouth Congregational UCC

Pentechaosⁱ
John 20:19b-22a and Acts 2:1-13

Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

Of the 3 aspects of the Trinity, I find I often connect clearest with the Holy Spirit.

I like the Spirit's movement, its breathiness and it's fire;
my imagination comes alive in its power to
inspire our innate and individual gifts;

I appreciate that glimpses of the Spirit are fleeting,
that I can't pin it down, name it, paint it or provide
any convincing evidence of its existence.

Sometimes it seems that, because we have stories of Jesus' lived life,
we get bogged down in determining
what is fact and what is historical impossibility.

And the Creator, also known as Father in the Trinitarian formula,
holds too much baggage in a Christian faith trying to
reclaim the wholeness of God's self.

The Holy Spirit allows for none of this – it simply is.

Today is Pentecost,
the day when we celebrate the birth of the Christian church.

The day when – as the author of Acts tells us – the apostles were all gathered in one place,
and the Holy Spirit was made known among them in wind and in flame.

It's still a holy day for us – the 50th day after Easter,
when Christ's Advocate, the Sustainer, the Sanctifier, the Holy Spirit
finds central place in our worship. It's Pentecost!

It's also Mother's Day.

And it is a rare occurrence that these two celebrations would fall on the same day.

United Methodist author and preacher Safiyah Fosua
offered a word of caution to those of us
treading our pulpits' potentially chaotic waters this week.

She says, "which celebration takes precedence? The obvious answer would be Pentecost...But who said the obvious is easy? Mother's Day happens to be one of the Big Three: Christmas, Easter and Mother's Day. In fact, in some parts of the country, Mother's Day attendance surpasses that of Christmas or Easter! [So] if you are expecting a sea of visitors [they] are probably not coming for your fiery Pentecost sermon"ⁱⁱ.

Duly noted.

And so we enter worship this morning with multiplied expectations:

Celebrate the beginning of Christ's church and its continued ministry in the world, or celebrate moms? If only it were just these two major points on our hearts and minds this week, perhaps then the preacher's choice would be simpler.

But there is more.

The very mention of the Spirit's wind

brings to our mind's eye images from across the globe.

The fierce cyclone that has frenzied the lives of Myanmar's citizens

challenges our cherished picture of a tame breath that blows new life to the apostles.

We must pause within our celebrations to recognize the loss of life, the loss of livelihood, the utter loss.

And, almost frivolous beside news of the cyclone,

this week we have also been witnesses to still more emphasis on our nation's political upheaval, the media bombarding us with the "news" that we have not yet decided on a Democratic presidential candidate.

The winds have blown us through a week of chaos –

and these several examples only speak to our shared or communal life.

What about each individual one of us gathered in this room today?

Chances are that—during the past week—most of us will have had something that disrupted our everyday.

What blew unexpected into your family or your work?

What joy or anxiety has swept into your personal life?

It's finals time for students and teachers.

It's impending graduation for seniors and parents.

Health concerns, another birthday, an accident, a new friend
all add to our days' fullness.

Sometimes there seems no end to the rush –

no moment of peace except, perhaps, within the very eye of the storm.

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I imagine that the apostles, too, experienced this.

Crowded together, all of a sudden speaking in tongues, chaos erupting from their own lips so that some who heard whispered rumors of drunkenness.

Whatever they were preparing for, however they were planning their next steps was interrupted, utterly changing their direction.

The winds had blown a new course.

And *this* is what we call the birth of the church.

This chaotic expression of language  
and people  
and difference  
and emotion  
and understanding.

This is where the Good News of Christ's teaching begins its life in full.

And so the apostles go out,  
speaking with Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and Romans, Cretans and Arabs.

All of them.

All of them honoring the Jewish Festival that drew them to Jerusalem,  
all of them carrying the fullness of their own lives

and the lives of their communities within them,

all of them hearing the words they needed to hear -

each in their own ways -

in order to be *inspired*.

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We continue to speak in different languages when we remember that our own understandings and experiences do not speak for all hearers.

For example -

some of us will clearly state our truth that Pentecost,
as a Christian holiday, as a new season of the church year,
is the most important topic of the day.

Others of us are adamant in our truth that
Mothers are a significant part of the life of the church -
not to mention a foundation for life itself! -
and therefore we ought to make Mother's Day
the centerpiece of our worship.

Still others of us find Christ's message of
compassion for the hurting and justice for the downtrodden
demands that our attention be focused on the crisis in Myanmar.

And there are those among us
who are quietly desperate for a word of hope for their own lives,
for the struggles they cope with day in and day out.

Amidst all of this we might ask:

Where are the tongues of fire to rest upon each of us today,
that any one of us may speak words of Good News to one another
from as many places as there are needs?

But you see: that's the wonder of the Holy Spirit.

It *does* rest upon each of us.

It breathes within us at our creation,
and it speaks through us in our day to day.

As I agonized over how to preach Pentecost in this week of chaos,
I finally realized that I don't have to -

because *by the Spirit each of you* may speak as well.

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In John's Gospel, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit very differently from the Acts version of events.

They are terrified.

They are locked in a room for fear.

And the first words the risen Christ speaks to them are "Peace be with you".

And the gathered community, in knowing Christ's presence among them, begins to rejoice!

And yet again, he says to them, "Peace be with you".

In their fear and in their rejoicing: "Peace be with you".

And then he commissions them.

He tells them that they are the ones to carry the Good News.

They are the ones to speak. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit".

Each of us is sent, with the Holy Spirit breathing in us.

Each of us is called to speak the Good News – to the rejoicing, to the fearful, to the sorrowing.

We are each called to be the church

("I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together").

We are called to speak in our different languages

the values we hold through the teachings of Christ.

That is why we have a place for each of your voices and each of your passions.

We have a Mission Committee and an Adult Education program;

that is why we have fellowship groups and a Health Ministry Team;

that is why we have Choir and sermon talkback.

We have each been called and commissioned to speak

with the flame of passion that Spirit has rested upon us.

I can't say everything on a Sunday morning, and neither can Lorraine or Hal  
or any single preacher who has ever lived.

But together, *as the church*, all of us can touch as many topics as there are people among us.

So, in the name of new and unexpected Pentecost-speaking experiences,  
now is your opportunity to preach, to share the Good News.

What is it that is greatest in your heart this morning?

What is it that, as you are so inspired, you would share with others?

Perhaps it's the joy of celebrating Mother's Day or the sorrow of having lost a mother.

Maybe there is something going on in your life that could touch or teach others.

Or maybe you'd learn more about the UCC's Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Black Liberation Theology;

the local environment regarding the Glade reservoir or uranium mining in Nunn;

or human rights protests following the path of the Olympic Torch.

The entirety of our lived experiences touch upon our faith;  
and we seek to find ways to respond according to that faith.

As the Church, the tongues of Pentecost are upon you.

So now, in the same chaos that usually reigns as we Pass the Peace each Sunday,

I invite you to tell 2 of your neighbors what is highest on your list this morning.

Speak!

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We are all preachers – all sharers of the Good News as our conversations continue in the world.

A multitude of tongues! *This is the church. **We are the church.***

In all our messy, chaotic, communal and individual lives – we are the church.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Thank you to my Denver colleague Nadia (aka The Sarcastic Lutheran) for this title. She can be found at <http://sarcasticlutheran.typepad.com>.

ⁱⁱ “Mother’s Day on Pentecost?” by Safiyah Fosua on www.gbod.org/worship.