

May 28, 2023  
1 Corinthians 12:4-13  
Acts 2:1-21

Activated by God

Sometimes I wonder if God knows what God is doing. I wonder why there are allergies and mosquitos. I wonder why there are typhoons and hurricanes. I wonder why there has to be war and violence. And poverty, and addiction. I wonder why there can't be more love and why Christians I meet have become more hateful and superstitious. I wonder when God is going to do something. When will God be God?

I want God to be God. I'm bet you do too. If we are being honest, we might wonder who really is in charge here. The system is broken. Our Presbyterian ancestors thought the same thing. They thought it was illogical to wait for God to do some kind of magic. They came from a time of Enlightenment and advancing knowledge. God gave us the brains to figure things out. God gave us science. It's what the Protestant church is built on. Education. Self-improvement. We aren't waiting for some supernatural phenomena to save us. It's up to us to make the world better, not God.

People wondered what God could really do if everything had natural causes and natural outcomes. God's power became less important. And the church became less important too. We have tried to stay relevant. We have tried to find a purpose in the world. We try to help people find themselves and find the divine. We are just one more company trying to put out a good product. Another business trying to make enough money to stay afloat. A clubhouse where people can belong and fit in. But where does God fit into this? How does God and God's power matter to us?

This where the story of Pentecost comes in. It's a story we need to hear. It's a story we have to hear. We are waiting for God just like the first disciples. We are waiting for something beyond ourselves to show up. We are waiting for something bigger than ourselves to guide us and help us. We know we can't handle all of this. We need God to come and step into our lives and set things right. To do what we can't do ourselves. We want God to be God, not us.

Like the first disciples who gathered at Pentecost. We need God. We need hope. We need to say it out loud and confess that we can't do this

alone. We can't stop the bad things going on around us. We can't make it better. We need God to do something about the injustice. We need God to do something about the imbalance and unfairness of the world. We need God to right the wrongs and bring us out from under the powers around us and within us that are destroying us. Greed, selfishness, ignorance, the need to win at any cost. We need to know that THIS isn't all there is. That there is something more, something bigger. Something good and holy and divine.

We admit that we can't fix things by trying harder. We can't fix others. We can't fix stupid. We can't fix evil. It sounds supernatural, I know. But there really IS some kind of force, some energy bent on undoing us, tricking us, sabotaging us, making us slaves to itself, making us give up hope. We try to live in love and hope, but we get deceived and lured away from it. It's been happening since the very beginning when Adam and Eve were tricked into eating the fruit by the snake. The snake told them it would be OK. This was from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And wouldn't having knowledge be a good thing? Wouldn't understanding everything help? "Hey, says the serpent, this will help

you. This will fix things. You will know all there is to know and you will be like God.”

And isn't that what we want; to be like God? To have power like God, to have strength and control like God. To acquire everything God has, strength and wealth untold and victory over our enemies. If we have enough knowledge and power, and if we pursue it and sacrifice to it and give our time and our money and our energy to it, then we will have control. We will be gods. Like the emperors and kings of old, ruling because it was their right; calling themselves divine, making others worship them and serve their vision of the world.

Maybe the early church was hoping for that. Maybe they were hoping that God would give them an empire. Because they didn't one. They didn't have power or money or influence in their community. All they had was Jesus and the hope that they would be his church and he would give them power to do so. In our reading, Jesus' followers are gathered, waiting and hoping. It is the Jewish festival of Shavuot, the festival of the first harvest that comes 50 days after Passover. Let's not forget the disciples were Jewish. And Jesus was Jewish. Their connection to God

was based on the Jewish story of God. And that story is all about waiting. Waiting for God to free them from slavery in Egypt. Waiting to get to the Promised Land. Waiting in Babylon to get back home. It's all about waiting. But how good are we at waiting? How ready are we, as the church, to wait for God? To wait for a power beyond ourselves?

At Pentecost, the disciples were together waiting and praying for God to come when suddenly something arrives. It feels like wind. Like fire, a flame lighting each of them, all of them up; anointing them with a strength greater than their own. With an imagination, a knowledge deeper than their own. It is not from within them; it is from God. It makes them think new thoughts and dream new dreams and speak new words. It sends them out to meet others. All the others from faraway lands who just so happen to be in Jerusalem. So that they can hear the good news themselves, that God is God and God is God for them too. God can unite, God can heal, God can put together what was broken. Because God raised Jesus from the dead, God can raise us from the dead too. It's what the world has been waiting to hear. We who are waiting for God, who are longing for God. God is here among us. God's spirit is

with us. And God is bigger than us, bigger than our church, bigger than our nationality, bigger than our religion. God isn't something we control. God isn't our pet or our possession. God is God. And THIS, this time, this place, this tragedy, this heartache, this ending that we are experiencing, this isn't all there is. God has given us a Spirit, anointing us with hope beyond ourselves that spills out into the world.

Wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name. Wherever we admit we can't be God and we give up trying to be God and instead we wait for God. Instead of trying to overpower or control or punish the world, we hold out hope for God, for love, for healing. Our knowledge, our understanding isn't enough. There is more, more to others, more to ourselves, more to this world. There is a space for grace. Whether it is here, at this table. Or out in the garden. Or at youth group or a fellowship meal or at worship with St. Matthew AME church. At school, at work, in our neighborhoods. We believe in a love that won't let us go. We believe that God is God, so we don't have to be.

That is the power of the Spirit. The power that goes beyond us. And it comes in a variety of ways with a variety of gifts. It's not one person or

one way or one size fits all. It works however God decides is best. And at Pentecost, what God decided is that the Spirit should be poured out on everyone. Everyone should speak a different language to connect with a different community. Everyone should have a different gift to meet a different need. That's the sign of the true church. The Spirit will keep working in us and among us. As it did in the past, so it will in the future. Notice that of all the languages listed in our Bible passage today, not one of them is English. It carefully lists every languages in the known world but the one we speak wasn't one of them back then. It hadn't been invented yet. And yet now, today God's Spirit speaks to us in our language. God's Spirit is always at work, translating, interpreting, sharing the good news in terms that people can understand. Because the good news is that this isn't all there is. The way things are isn't the way they have to be. The lost can be found. The broken can be mended. The blind can see again. The ones in darkness can see the light. The dead can rise again. Those who are not a people can be God's people.

The variety of gifts and abilities and languages given to us is a sign of the church, Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians. The Spirit is poured

out and activated in everyone for the common good. All these differences are for a greater good. Not for our good alone. And how the Spirit does things may not be how we would do things. Whoever the Spirit works through may not be who we would work through.

Remember Paul, the one gave us some of our greatest ideas about God used to persecute Christians. He used to work against everything that Jesus stood for, but God stepped in and suddenly, he believed in everything Jesus stood for. God stepped in and transformed him. We have faith that God can transform anyone.

It is by God's power, not our power that we are saved. God's Spirit gathers us from east and west and north and south. Jew and Greek. Slave and free. Men and women. Young and old. Left and right. Gay and straight. Native and foreign. All of them given a power beyond themselves. All given the power to channel God's love and redemption. All given the power from above, not to be another kingdom in the world, but to be the kingdom of God.

We must wait and watch and hope for this power and continue to let God be God. We must first confess that we need God. We need something



beyond ourselves to have life. We need God to give us gifts we need to make us the church God needs us to be. And we must be ready to receive them. We must be ready to accept whoever God activates and whatever situations come our way. The sign of Pentecost, the sign of God's power is when impossibly different people are gathered for one purpose, to be one family. To be something we could not be alone. To do something we could not do by ourselves. Because without the spirit, we can do nothing. May God give us hope. May God's energy and imagination be poured out on us. May we trust that God can and will be God, and God will give us a power beyond ourselves to be God's people.