

Rev. Lisa Schrott
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Acts 2:1-6; 14-17; Numbers 11:24-30
Insider Knowledge

Prayer of Illumination

Holy Spirit, we ask you to be with us this morning. As long ago you inspired and astonished people calling them to service, come to us now to fill our ears with the sound of your breath, fill our eyes with the brilliance of your presence in each other, fill our hearts with your good Word. Still in us any voices but your own. Amen.

Welcome to Pentecost - what we consider the birth of the church. The book of Acts opens with these words: In the first book (that is the book of Luke), Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. While staying with them, Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So here we are. Jesus has ascended into heaven and the disciples are gathered in Jerusalem. They were gathered to celebrate Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, a major Jewish harvest holiday, occurring 50 days after the Passover. In Greek, Pentecost means 50, hence the use of this term by Luke, the author of Acts. So the disciples are gathered and waiting for the promise of the Father - that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Hear now these words from Acts Chapter 2, beginning with verses 1-6 and then continuing with verses 14-17.

Acts 2:1-6; 14-17

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

‘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. **This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Open with recordings....

These are the sounds of our faith – A Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration in Columbus, Ohio; a Sunday worship service at the Korean Church of Columbus; a recitation and parishioner response during a Holy Qurbana service with multiple Orthodox communities at the St. Barnabas Orthodox Church in Sunbury, OH; and the Maundy Thursday service here at PCO in April 2017.¹ These recordings are part of the Sounds of Religion exhibit at the MSU Museum.² Sounds of Religion is a Smithsonian exhibition developed in collaboration with MSU Religious Studies Professor Dr. Amy DeRogatis and Dr. Isaac Weiner (OSU). Sounds of Religion asks visitors, “what does religion in the United States sound like?” The exhibit will be on display until the end of June and is worth checking out. You can also visit it online. It features hymn singing, cooking communal meals, protesting in the streets, and silent meditation as representatives of the diverse religious sonic landscape today.

The religious sonic landscape on that day of Pentecost so many years ago was also diverse, and yet empowered by the Holy Spirit there was also a sense of unity. Those gathered were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. And the crowd who had gathered was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. How can this be?

As one commentator has noted, “As if to answer this question, Peter stands and speaks. He cites the prophet Joel, adapting those ancient words to illuminate the present: now comes the long-promised “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit upon “all flesh.” Jesus both heralded and inaugurated this new era, and the Spirit will empower a community through whom the movement’s message of healing, liberation, and joy will go out to the ends of the earth. The church is born! On another level, these events echo the old story in Numbers, when God’s Spirit spreads the burden and responsibility of leadership among all 70 elders, causing Moses to exclaim, “Would that all God’s people were prophets and that God would put the divine spirit on them!”³

Hear now that story from the Old Testament book of Numbers 11:24-30

¹ https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=241
https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=243
https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=233
https://explore.religioussounds.osu.edu/visualization?target_visualization=archive&record=255

² <https://museum.msu.edu/?exhibition=american-religious-sounds>

³ Salt Project. Commentary on Pentecost (Year A): Acts 2:1-21 and Numbers 11:24-30;
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/25/understand-and-connect-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-pentecost>

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy of the elders of the people and placed them all around the tent (*that is the tent of meeting*). Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses and took some of the spirit that was on Moses and put it on the seventy elders, and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Eldad, Medad. To quote Sesame Street, one (or two) of these things are not like the others. In the list of the great prophets of the Bible or even the list of kind of great prophets of the Bible, Eldad and Medad are nowhere to be found. This is the only time that they are mentioned and they don't even get to speak. Rather they are noted for coloring outside the lines: they prophesied while in the camp rather than out at the tent of meeting.

The Book of Numbers, an oft-neglected Old Testament book, relates the trek of the Israelites physically and spiritually to the Promised Land. It begins in the second year of their journey and ends as they prepare to enter Canaan. It is very orderly affair in Numbers, with intricate logistics that would make the most frequent flyer proud. And the stories in Numbers are often more colorful than the parallel stories in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. All our human emotion is on full display. While there are moments of joy, mostly the emotions run to the angry, jealous, life is unfair end of the spectrum. The Hebrew people complain and complain and complain. And like many of us on a long road trip, Moses' patience runs out. He pulls the car over to the side of the road and asks what he did to deserve such an ungrateful, whiny lot.

Moses says to the Lord "I can't do this anymore. You might as well put me to death now, because if I have to listen to them tell me how good the melons were in Egypt one more time, I'm going to lose it". And the Lord, the merciful Lord, tells Moses to gather 70 elders and bring them to the tent of meeting and the Lord will not only talk to Moses in their presence, but will take some of the spirit given to Moses and put it on the elders so that they can share the burden.

So Moses gathers the elders in the tent of meeting. The tent of meeting is the designated location where God meets with Moses. During their journey to the Promised Land, the Tent of

Meeting was set-up outside of the camp proper where the people were living. We hear this morning that the Lord God came down and spoke to Moses and the elders gathered at the Tent of Meeting, and the Spirit rested on the elders and they prophesied or had an intense religious experience. They became Spirit-empowered leaders and the burden Moses has been carrying is shared. They all sing Kum Bay Yah and skip and dance their way to Canaan.

Not so fast. Because we have a tattletale in our midst who just can't wait to report to Moses and the other elders that Eldad and Medad remained inside the camp (where the Spirit was able to find them just fine) instead of going out to the Tent of Meeting. And like an older sibling in the back seat of the car on a long trip, Joshua can't wait to shout "Stop them!".

Joshua. Joshua, the golden boy pipes in. Joshua already had some credentials at this point in the journey. He was a young man, but was included in the group of elders and he was the assistant of Moses. Not AN assistant, but THE assistant. He had credibility and access. And we know the rest of his story, that of the hero who led the conquest of the Promised Land. He evens gets a book of the Bible named after him.

Was Joshua just doing his job here, protecting Moses' authority from outsiders and making sure that the prophesy was decent and in order? Or maybe Joshua was feeling a bit insecure and threatened. Who are these upstart Eldad and Medad that think that they can stay in the camp and prophesy there instead of joining with the rest of the elders in the tent of meeting? And if they can do it, what's to stop other people from prophesying in the camp? Next thing you know, we will have chaos. Who will control all of this Spirit?

Stop them. Stop him. Stop her. How many people have heard those words? And heard them from church leaders? Outside... inside....who gets to prophesy and where do they get to do it? In the reading from the Book of Numbers, we have no idea what Eldad and Medad prophesied. Maybe it was challenging. Maybe it was reassuring. We will never know. All we know is that they didn't do it where they were supposed to do it. They didn't follow the rules.

I recently read an opinion piece from a college dean that shed light for me on this story. The author was discussing the insider knowledge or what he was calling the "hidden curriculum" that often stymies students. Hidden curriculum "refers to the unspoken expectations in a given field that new entrants are expected to know, even if they were never formally taught". He shares, that "access to academia's hidden curricula is uneven, though it tends broadly to correlate with race and parental backgrounds. Higher education isn't the only industry with unwritten rules, though; part of the reason that so many professional athletes are the children of other professional athletes, I suspect, is that they're raised knowing the unwritten rules. Others don't. The recent concern about "nepotism babies" in show business probably reflects their similar insider knowledge and, in that case, connections. When you grow up in an

industry, you learn some of its rules by osmosis.” The author concludes, saying, “That doesn’t guarantee success, but it helps.”⁴

I think Eldad and Medad suffered from not knowing the hidden curriculum; of not being privy to the insider knowledge. Not knowing that there was a proper place for them to be located if they were to participate in hearing from the Lord. And I think they represent one of the challenges for the church today.

Dr. Dustin Benac is an educator and practical theologian who studies how Christian communities adapt to a shifting organizational landscape. He researches and writes on how drastically the world of faith is changing. In a recent article in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, he shares that, “...the secularizing shifts evident in American society so far in the 21st century show no signs of slowing ... the statistics give rise to a question that is at once more personal and more troubling: What form of Christianity will care for our children? Much as the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote on the occasion of a child’s baptism in 1944, I know “by the time [they] grow up, the form of the church will have changed considerably.”⁵

That was the challenge for Moses on that day as the Hebrews were camped on their long journey to the Promised Land. The Lord had intervened and freed them from the grasp of Pharaoh, providing them safe passage out of Egypt and sustaining them on this journey. How were the people now going to refashion themselves as a community who worshipped the Lord. Well it turns out they needed a little help, and the Lord makes a covenant with them through the Ten Commandments.

This was also the challenge for Peter on the day of Pentecost. Up until this point, it had been a small band of disciples who had followed Jesus. And while they may not have agreed on everything, the disciples had similar backgrounds, spoke the same language, came from the same culture. But that was about to change in a big way. After Peter finishes preaching, we hear in verse 41 that those who welcomed Peter’s message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. The rest of the book of Acts, and the letters and epistles from Paul and others, are all about the joys, and yes challenges, of what happens when the Spirit is poured out and our sons and our daughters prophesy, and our young see visions, and our old dream dreams.

The birth of the church at Pentecost changed the center of gravity for the followers of Jesus. While there had been crowds that followed Jesus, it was the disciples who were the leaders

⁴ Matt Reed. Hidden Curricula. The unwritten rules are unevenly known. *Insider Higher Ed*. May 16, 2023. Found online at <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/blogs/confessions-community-college-dean/2023/05/16/hidden-curricula>.

⁵ Dustin D. Benac. Christianity’s shifting structure. *Presbyterian Outlook*. May 2, 2023. Available online at <https://pres-outlook.org/2023/05/christianitys-shifting-structure/>

of the movement after Jesus' death. And when the Holy Spirit gets involved, things change. This can threaten our desire for control, our desire to have things neat and tidy. And it can threaten our place of privilege – our place as insiders, with insider's knowledge. Peter and the other disciples not only knew Jesus' teachings, they knew Jesus. They ate with him, traded stories on long walks, celebrated weddings, wept together at the loss of their friend Lazarus. As the Spirit moved on that Pentecost day, and so many days after that, the disciples had to relinquish some of the authority, power, control, and privilege that came with being insiders. To do that Peter, like Moses, had to rely on the Holy Spirit, for it was the Spirit who allowed them to focus on what lay ahead, rather than where they had been.

In the Preparation in the bulletin, I share some comments by pastor and hip hop artist the Rev. Julian DeShazier. He says,

“Walter Gretzky told the peewee hockey team he coached—which included his son, Wayne—to “skate to where the puck is going, not to where it has been.”... Churches are notoriously tardy to the party. We spend a lot of our time skating to current trends, only to find that the puck has already slid somewhere else. We spend way too much time looking backward, playing catch-up, instead of preparing for what lies ahead.”

What our church needs are people who can help elicit trust and speak to our deepest yearnings. We need congregations that address realities with the boldness and faithfulness of the One whom we claim inspires us. We need laypeople and clergy who are emboldened to speak the truth of God within the church's walls and at the gates of empire.⁶

Friends, this is the gift of Pentecost. The gift of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to look forward, to look ahead and to be emboldened to speak the truth of God, not just within the walls of our sanctuary, but in the world. The Holy Spirit breathes new life into the community, and new life means new people and new horizons for ministry. And it means that the work of the gathered body may not always be done in the same location or in the same ways that it had been done before. Like Eldad and Medad, we may be called into the community rather than being in the confines of the church. Like Peter, we may be called to invite others to journey with us, others who may hear God in a different voice than we do. May we allow the Holy Spirit to coax and cajole us into welcoming what lies ahead, even if means giving up our insider status. And may the Holy Spirit prepare us to welcome those who will join us on this journey. Amen. Join me in prayer.

⁶ Julian DeShazier. The well-credentialed pastor. *Christian Century*. May 12, 2023. Available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/voices/well-credentialed-pastor?>