

A Joyful Noise

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 31, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

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 nation 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. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 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 visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

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. 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.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

*And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,*

blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

*The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,*

before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" (Acts 2:1-21, NRSV)

One of my earliest experiences of church was singing in the young children's choir, for kids between about five and seven. There's even this horrifying picture in my parents' house to prove it. I don't remember anything we ever sang, but I certainly remember the *name* of the choir ... it was pretty unforgettable: The *Joyful Noise* Choir. Have you ever heard of a better name for a young children's choir? 😊

But it was only years later, as I was first starting out in Christian Education leadership, that I truly began to understand and appreciate this name. If you've ever taught Sunday School or Vacation Bible School or the like, you already know that it is quite an experience to lead young children in Bible-related activities – such as the telling of a story, crafts, and prayer. But for me, the best of all is teaching kids *a new song*. You know I get to do that a lot in leading our Preschool's chapel time!

Inevitably, there is some awkwardness at first, as I sing the song out loud for the kids to hear. And I get *looks*: Looks of amusement ... embarrassment ... befuddlement ... sometimes even derision! But then, I ask them to join in, as I sing it a second time. There is usually some hesitation, the kids making a kind of low babbling sound, as no one child wishes their voice to stand out (*most* anyway!) or to be heard getting the words wrong, but eventually, with patience and perseverance (and having something to do with their hands helps), the kids start to get it. They truly start to make a *joyful noise*! With all the freedom of childhood, they truly begin to *sing*, as they forget themselves and just become part of the music. And of course, the *real* test is if they take the song home, and regale their parents with one round after another of what they learned.

There's something about this learning of a new song, this low babbling morphing into a joyful noise, that makes me think of Pentecost: Jesus' first disciples, not so unlike children in Preschool or Bible School ... gathered together in a room ... a little anxious ... unsure of what's coming next, and yet expectant ... open to something fresh and new. Our text tells us that on this fateful day, the Feast of Pentecost, they are all together in one place, and that suddenly the winds of change begin to blow ... their rushing sound filling the room. And that then suddenly, tongues of flame appear and rest on each of them, filling them with the Holy Spirit.

And on this day, what that means is that these 120 Galileans begin praising God in other languages. Bewilderment and confusion ensue as the cacophony of sound, the clash of discordant voices rises, fills the space, and then escapes out into the open air. To those nearby, it must seem like utter chaos ... to those far away, it must sound like a low, incoherent babbling sound coming from that upper room. And in the utter strangeness of it all, the huge crowds outside draw closer.

The crowds are there because it is Pentecost, one of the most sacred days in the Jewish tradition. Because of it, thousands of Jews of many nations are there in Jerusalem for the sacred observance. And together, they are utterly bewildered, having no idea what is going on ... that is, until one pilgrim from Parthia recognizes his own Parthian tongue coming from that room. And then, another from Babylon picks out the praise of God in her own language. And

then another from Libya ... and another from Arabia ... and another from Alexandria ... and another from Rome!

And so it goes until *all* are hearing of God's mighty deeds in their own languages, coming from the mouths of hicks from Galilee! What could be the meaning of this? What could possibly be going on? Some, it seems, are open to something not yet even imagined ... others find it easier to chalk it up to no-account Galileans hitting the booze a bit early.

The truth is, maybe even the disciples themselves are wondering, as surprised as anyone else. But then, Peter ...

- Peter, who had put his foot in his mouth more than anyone thought humanly possible ...
- Peter, who had declared his willingness to die with Jesus, only to deny him *three* times a few hours later ...
- Peter, the man who was given his life back by being given a priceless second chance to tell his best friend, whom he had denied, to tell him, "You know that I love you" ...

That Peter stands with his fellow disciples and raises his clear, bold voice and speaks a word that changes the world forever. And what begins as incoherent babbling becomes in time a joyful noise unto the Lord, a new song, rising from all over the earth!

Recall how the psalmist exults in the glories of God –

*O sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things ...
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.*

(Psalm 98:1, 4-6, NRSV)

That new song is still rising, though it must be learned and practiced anew in every life, in every generation. The church of Jesus Christ was born in the fires of Pentecost and is made up of ordinary people from all backgrounds, of all languages and walks of life, people like you and me, those near and far away ... Ordinary people, yes, but on an *extraordinary* journey.

Like those first disciples, we are a people called to move beyond stagnation and despair on to new horizons, new frontiers. We are called *to be a community committed to the learning of this new song* ... God's own song of justice, peace, and hope ...

- A song that rises in defiance of racism, and of blind indifference to it, even (or especially) when it's our own ...

- A song of truth and life confronting an irresponsibility and selfishness that puts the most vulnerable among us at risk ...
- A song that dreams of a new world and then slowly transforms us to welcome it, rather than resist it, and which then empowers us to watch and pray and work toward it.

This is the ultimate message of Pentecost. Our Christian life together is about learning this new song.

And that's it, isn't it?! Jesus himself said that if we are to be his disciples, we are to become like children – perhaps even like Preschool children learning a new song. Imagine it! We gather together and every week hear strange words, strange calls, strange challenges. For some of us, the familiarity of the words and forms may obscure how strange they actually are, but if we listen closely, if we listen deeply, perhaps we will hear them anew in all their foundation-shaking power.

Perhaps like children we will look on with amusement ... embarrassment ... befuddlement ... perhaps sometimes even derision. Perhaps we will hesitate, as no one of us wishes their voice to stand out or to be heard getting the words wrong.

Our practicing may come off as babbling at first, but eventually, with patience and perseverance, we may start to get it. And just like children, having something to do with our hands helps here, as nothing cements the sweet melody of discipleship in our hearts and minds like *service*.

We persevere in hope that our awkward efforts may rise up and become a truly joyful noise unto the Lord. We may really start to sing. The new song may then flow in and through us, as we forget ourselves and just become one with the music. And of course, the true test is if we take the song home, and then out into the world.

To the glory of God! Amen.