

## **A Joyful Noise**

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 5, 2022 (Pentecost Sunday)  
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)*

St Simons Island, Georgia is a beautiful place. It's where Lisa and I began our time away – at the Epworth-by-the-Sea Retreat Center on the remote west side of the island. At Turner Lodge, where we stayed, all the rooms face west and each has a private balcony, meaning that it's *quiet* and that we had an unspeakably beautiful view of the sunset each night.

Both early in the mornings and late into the evenings, I would seek out time to sit outside alone, in the silence facing the Mackay River. Peace ... Tranquility ... A respite from the noise and heartbreak and frustration of the world.

And what a time it was to take such a break, and how needed, with the world so broken and the bonds which hold us together so tattered, with so much in disarray and children being murdered, innocents being slaughtered, and the powers that be seemingly powerless to do one blessed thing about it.

It was a good time to slip away for a while.

But *escape* was and is not an option. The time would end soon enough, and all would have to be faced again, but how? That's what this silence, facing the river, was really about. How to come *back* and face it all, again, and waiting for God to deliver the answer to that question, or if not the answer, the strength and the courage to live with it and to be faithful in this moment.

There is a raw, austere poem by the late Welsh Anglican priest R.S. Thomas. It's entitled "Kneeling," and it imagines a prolonged moment of silence in a church, full of kneeling parishioners and a minister, all of whom have stepped aside from the relentless clamor of life and are patiently waiting for a message from God:

*Moments of great calm,  
Kneeling before an altar  
Of wood in a stone church  
In summer, waiting for God  
To speak; the air a staircase  
For silence; the sun's light  
Ringing me, as though I acted  
A great role. And the audiences  
Still; all that close throng  
Of spirits waiting, as I,  
For the message.  
Prompt me, God;  
But not yet. When I speak,  
Though it be you who speak  
Through me, something is lost.  
The meaning is in the waiting.*

It's that last line which I find so full of significance: "*The meaning is in the waiting.*" It grips me because I know it's true. I know it's true because *I've* been the one kneeling in the church, or sitting on a balcony facing a river, wondering if anyone is listening ... waiting for some sign in response. The meaning is in the very thing I find so hard to do. Every fiber of my being wants to go DO something, to make something happen, but oftentimes it is life itself that brings us to a halt and drives us to our knees. And there, it doesn't get any easier.

We know that with the mystery of God, there is no "right here, right now." That's not how it works. God is not an app I can turn on to get the answers I need or the peace I long for. God seems not terribly interested in my expectations, nor in my timetable for results. Life in God is something different entirely.

Those first disciples of Jesus knew this. By the second chapter of Acts, they had been chastened enough by their experience of running out ahead on their own steam to know better than to try to surge forward without further guidance. By this time, they *know* that they need a break. They had seen so much, and they *know* that they *don't* know.

And so, following the risen Jesus' instructions, they return to Jerusalem to commit themselves to prayer – and to waiting for the empowerment of the Spirit, as Jesus himself had promised. They know that without this, they quite literally don't have it in them to do what they're being called to do. We're not told exactly how long they wait together in silence, but their waiting is not in vain.

Our text tells us that on this fateful day, they are all together in one place, and that suddenly the winds of change begin to blow ... a 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 far away, it must sound like a low, incoherent babbling sound coming from that upper room. To those nearby, it must seem like utter chaos ... and in the bizarre strangeness of it all, the huge crowds outside draw closer.

The crowds are there because it is the Feast of Pentecost, one of the most sacred days in the Jewish tradition. Because of it, thousands of Jews, of many nations, are there. And together, they are utterly bewildered, having no idea what's 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? Some, it seems, are open

to something not yet even imaginable ... 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 had been given his life back by being given a priceless second chance ...

*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 in the silence of waiting, and slowly rises as incoherent babble, soon becomes a joyful noise unto the Lord, rising up in all the tongues of the earth!

Remember 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)*

And that joyful noise, that new song, is still rising, though it must be listened for anew in every generation, in every life. The church was born in the fires of Pentecost and is made up of ordinary people from all backgrounds, of all languages and walks of life ... ordinary people like you and me. And like those first disciples, we too are destined for more than escape, stagnation, and despair. We are meant for new horizons and new frontiers, as a community living into *God's* own new song ...

- A song of *life* that rises in defiance of the dealers of death ...
- A song of *justice* that transforms the handwringing of well-meaning “thoughts and prayers” into moral clarity and faithful action ...
- A song of *hope* that works on our own weary hearts that we might believe again, and dream and work for a better world for our children.

This joyful noise, this new song, is Pentecost's promise for the poor in spirit, for *all* of us who wait. And our waiting will not be in vain.

You know, as I think about it, even as I sat on that balcony, facing the river, the signs were there, even then, that all is *not* lost, and that hope still arises. In the stillness of the late afternoon, you can watch shimmering dots of sunlight dance over the waters and lone seagulls seemingly floating on the winds overhead ... and it is as though nature itself knows something that we don't.

And then, later in the evening, as the sun drifts slowly below the horizon, a gentle night falls, but one filled with the calls of crickets and tree frogs to remind anyone listening that the pulse of life goes on. And as the night is well spent and the sweet songs of birds prophesy the morning light, the joyful noises of creation are renewed – to declare the glory of God. Amen.