

It's All New

A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
May 28, 2023

Acts 2: 1-21

Throughout the Bible God promises that he is doing a new thing. Just watch, he says, I am doing something you have never seen before. Something no one has thought of. God is in the business of creating, of doing new things.

God sends his Spirit — we often say, “pour out your Spirit upon us” or something similar. God pours out his Spirit, so that it splashes around, fills us and runs over. God is prodigal, profligate, with his Spirit. He just pours it out and it goes everywhere; he is almost wasteful with it! For his part, the Spirit enjoys this!

Let me tell you something: when God created the world, every thing that would ever happen, good bad or indifferent, was already there, in a way. God knew what would happen. God knew people would do horrible things to each other — yet what does God say? He says it's all good, very good!

Now either God is a sadistic and cruel liar, who laughs at our pain, or God knows more than we do (!) Perhaps God knows that he is going to do things we haven't thought of!

What if — what if God fully intends to save every one of us? What if *that* was what Jesus was up to in his life, death, and resurrection? What if instead of an eternal hell of suffering and fire, what God really intends is to purify us, somehow, and lead us into his kingdom?

Even to ask that question makes some people mad, and you have to wonder, why? What is it about us that causes us to want some people to suffer? We have this sort of eternal road rage that seeks to cause unending pain on offenders — but lets ourselves off easily.

The more I read the New Testament, the more I see a God like this, who is easily prodigal in his love for us. God loves his creation more than we can know — why else would he bother to create it? To create us? Why would he get involved in the mess of it all? God could have just not created the world, and been perfectly happy for all eternity — why would he do this, if not for love? We don't understand it, for it's a new thing.

So many times we see the world in a negative way; we see things as a threat, to our lifestyle, to our very lives, to our happiness, to our well-being, to our idea of what is right and wrong. Things that threaten us are easy to list — we can't even walk through downtown without the homeless people getting up in our faces and demanding ten dollars. Threats are everywhere!

Some threats are real. Some we would be wise to avoid. Some we just need to push back; as songwriter Bruce Cockburn puts it, we must “kick against the darkness until it bleeds daylight.” Yeah! Always our aim should be to love the world with God’s love: that never fails, that doesn’t judge, that seeks the best for the other. The same love that Jesus had for the people he encountered — that’s our standard. No other standard will do, whether sociological or political or theological!

And so to our text, the familiar story of that first Pentecost, the “birthday” of the church it is sometimes called. The Spirit comes like a mighty wind, like a burning fire, and fills the disciples, giving them power and leading them to begin to preach in all these languages. It’s the early church, the ancient Mediterranean world, where everyone had the language they grew up speaking, and most people also, the common Greek that you had to have to communicate across ethnic or geographic boundaries. What happens then is that the people hear the preaching of the apostles not in the common Greek, but in their native languages!

The apostles are preaching in languages they don’t know! The Spirit gives them this ability — and so they begin proclaiming the gospel to the “whole world,” all those places we read about, which amount to “everywhere around the Mediterranean.”

For a long time, the church has been caught in battles over stuff like what language we should speak. Some say, Greek! Others, Latin! More recently, it’s been the local language! Well, that last is obviously right, but more than that, we should learn to speak it in the dialect that surrounds us, to bring the good news of the gospel to people who may have never heard it, or who may have heard it in other tongues, who don’t know it when we proclaim it because they’ve been inoculated against it.

See, when the Spirit moved, when the Spirit came upon the apostles, they had a pretty well-formed notion that God was to be worshiped in Hebrew, or at least Aramaic, which was the language they spoke. Here the Spirit blew away those categories by giving them the ability to preach in all these other languages.

One of those languages is music. I can’t tell you how many times someone has come up to me and said “boy! The Spirit was really here today in worship!” What they usually mean is “boy! I liked the music today! It was really good!” And that in turn usually means, they liked the style of music. One guy used to say the Spirit was there and moving anytime the organ didn’t play, because he didn’t care for organ music. He wanted early 60s folkish Christian music. (Of course, there wasn’t much Christian music in the folk movement until the mid-70s, but I let that go. I knew what he meant.) When the Spirit is here, when the Spirit is moving, you can tell, but it isn’t because you like the music.

I would propose that the Spirit might be moving in that same direction among us today: giving us the ability to proclaim Jesus in the languages, using the words and terms that our neighbors and friends can understand. The truth is, no one out there cares much about sin or theories of the atonement, as important as those things may be to me, or to you perhaps. The average person on the streets of Newton wants to know that they will

be fed, treated fairly, and understood. They want to be heard — and they want to hear that ultimately God cares about them.

Those early preachers after Pentecost were constantly battling with the leaders of the community, because the gospel threatened the powers that be. We live in a very different cultural situation, but the gospel still comes across as a threat — it cannot be controlled. It won't be domesticated. The Spirit is like the wind, blowing wherever it will, and we can't tell it what to do or when. All we can do is hang onto our hats and see where the Spirit will blow us, will take us.

Each of us lives in a different community, if you will, a different set of friends and a different “place” in the town — and so for each of us, the exact outlines of what the Spirit is pointing us to will be different. You may be part of, or have access to, the millworkers or tradesmen in town. For someone else, it will be the lawyers and government workers, or the people who live in your community, on your street. Whatever community you are a part of, whatever community's language you speak, that is where you start. And you just ask people how they are doing, and how it is with them and God — once you get people started, it won't be hard or threatening. I find that lots of people just want to talk to someone, to have someone listen. So you don't have to prepare a speech or worse, a sermon!

When you talk with people, just listen, and at the right point, invite them to worship. Bring them to church with you. The Spirit will take it from there. God is doing a new thing, and doing a new thing here among us! You know, this congregation has a reputation for being wealthy, for being a church full of physicians. That may have been true at one point; for all I know it is still true. But I can tell you this: God is always doing something new. He may not gather up the rich doctors here in the future. God may bring in the poor and needy. God may bring in a wide variety of people all who have one thing in common: The Spirit of God.

It's all new, but let's not be afraid: the Spirit of God will be with us, pushing us, pulling us, walking with us, blowing in our faces, all the while bringing us into the new thing, the new kingdom, that God is creating among us and in front of us. It's all new: let's embrace it and see what God will do next!

Thanks be to God! Amen.