

June 8, 2025 – Trinity Episcopal Church – Pentecost Sunday

The Rev. Elizabeth Molitors

“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.”

Act 2:1-4

In one of her non-fiction essays¹, the author Barbara Kingsolver tells the story of a hermit crab that traveled with her from the Bahamas, where she'd been visiting, back to her then-home in Tucson, Arizona. Kingsolver didn't know that she had a hermit crab stowaway in her suitcase; she'd been collecting sea shells on the Bahamian beach, to bring back to her young daughter as souvenirs. Once home, she laid out the shells for her daughter to look at and admire, when all of a sudden, one of the shells began to crawl across the table.

They named the crab Buster, found a cage and food for him, and spent hours watching him feed and try out new sea shell homes and dig in the gravel that lined his cage. Every so often, his behavior was inexplicable — periods of intense, frenetic activity followed by times he was so still they thought he must be dead. Eventually they learned that Buster's cycles of commotion and idleness were connected to the tides — the tides in the home he'd left, in the Bahamas — 3000 miles away.

¹ Kingsolver, Barbara, *High Tide in Tucson*, 1995.

How odd, how disorienting, to live your life in response to a force outside of yourself; something so far removed, and yet intrinsically a part of you. Like the feeling of rolling motion that persists when you've returned to solid ground, after a day spent on a boat or jumping waves in the ocean.

It's been an odd, disorienting several weeks for the disciples. In the course of less than 2 months, they've seen their friend and mentor and teacher celebrated, tried and crucified, laid dead in a tomb. His body disappears, and then he shows up and cooks and eats with them. The disciples watch, astonished, as Jesus' body is lifted up and disappears in a cloud.

Are they at sea, or on dry ground? Either way, life feels pretty unsteady. No wonder they've gathered together in one place. True, it is a festival time in Jerusalem, so it makes sense that these friends are together. Besides, who else would they be with? Who else can they talk to about all that has gone on? Who else would understand?

In Jerusalem, in the time referenced in the reading from Acts, the Jews were celebrating Shavu'ot, also called the festival of weeks, which comes 50 days after Passover (which is where we get our word *Pentecost* – ‘pente’ for 50). Shavu'ot is a sacred holiday that celebrates the time when God gave the Torah to the Israelites – the written and oral teachings that would guide and define their lives as God's people. It was also one of the three pilgrimage festivals, the special holidays that called for Jews to make their way from wherever else they were living, to the temple in Jerusalem: “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia..” and all the

rest. A festival to honor the giving of the gift of God's Word to God's beloved people: that is why those "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" happened to be in Jerusalem, all at the same time.

And as I talked about on Palm Sunday, those occasions when Jerusalem was chock full of visitors was exactly when the Romans chose to put their full military might on display. If, as a Jew, you'd somehow forgotten that Jerusalem was a city occupied by a hostile, foreign government, the reminders came through quite clearly.

Perhaps the heightened security was what prompted the disciples to gather together in their locked room once again. They are, after all, the friends and compatriots of the man who was put to death just weeks ago, crucified for being an insurgent, a peaceful protestor, a challenge to Roman authority; a champion of those being crushed by imperial violence. If the Romans were looking to put an end to the movement they thought Jesus was behind, what better time to come after his followers than when there were lots of visitors in the big city; to send a message, far and wide, that civil disobedience was not to be tolerated.

The last time the disciples gathered together in a room like this, Jesus walked right through a wall to come to them, to show them his hands and his side, to let them know that he wasn't dead, but alive. Maybe such a thing will happen again? I like to try and imagine the atmosphere in the room: periods of awkward silence punctuated by little bursts of equally awkward conversation, perhaps. Everyone wondering, so, what should we do now? Maybe they should go back to their old jobs, to being the fishermen and tax

collectors and merchants they were before they met Jesus. Or, maybe someone should step forward, to try to fill the gap left by Jesus, and try to organize them to do....something?

Into that space of anxiety and uncertainty comes the answer that Jesus promised them: the Spirit, the Advocate, that will guide them where they need to go. Not a Spirit of comfort and reassurance, like a warm sweater or freshly baked cookies, but a spirit born of violent wind and bits of fire that swept in and danced around their heads and ignited them into action.

Because God clearly had plans for the disciples, outside of that room, and so sent a force powerful enough that it drove them from their place of fear and uncertainty, out into the world to tell the story of Jesus: about how grace and love and resurrection were forces far more formidable than fear or hate or, even, death. About how this message was meant for all people – the lost and the broken, as well as the righteous. In Shavu'ot, God gave God's Word in the Torah; in the incarnation, God gave God's Word in the person of Jesus; and now, on this Pentecost, God was giving God's Word to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit working through these reluctant, feet-of-clay disciples.

These followers of Jesus, who had spent 3 years, day and night, with the man, hearing him paint the vision for the world he longed to see – what Jesus called the Kingdom of God – they were now being invited – well, vigorously nudged – to help make that vision real and tangible. God didn't want them to lead a political revolution or make a power grab for temporal

authority – God's interests aren't that small. God had (God has) bigger things in mind: nothing less than entirely upending the world's understanding of what is strong, what is lasting, and who and what has value.

And so the disciples went out, moved to speak the message that Jesus had taught them, that they hadn't realized they'd fully absorbed, in languages they didn't know they knew, to a crowd which they weren't sure would warmly receive what they had to say, into streets lined with Roman national guard troops.

Thus was the church brought into being. Thank goodness there wasn't any social media at that time, or 24/7 news feeds, overwhelming them with stories of the strength of their opposition, or how the odds were entirely against them, otherwise the disciples might have stayed right where they were forever, fretting and hesitating, and never stepping out into the mass of people to proclaim and witness to "God's deeds of power."

There is a man named Benjamin Zander, who is a noted musician, orchestra conductor, and author of a book called *The Art of Possibility*, ideas from which he highlights in a series of TED talks.

His first TED talk is called The Transformative Power of Classical Music, and while his presentation is, ostensibly, about getting people to love classical music, I hear in his words a theme and a message much bigger and broader. If you exchange his music vocabulary for words about faith and God and the church, you hear something strongly reminiscent of not

only the concerns and angst of the huddled disciples, but also the power and confidence of God's spirit which was conferred on them that long-ago Pentecost day.

Zander describes the state of classical music at that time — and although his talk was 15 years ago, the situation he described then still seems amazingly fresh today, given the current threats to artistic freedom and arts funding. He speaks about how some in the industry were wringing their hands over the decline in ticket subscriptions, the dissolution of some orchestras, the fall-off in sales of CDs. At that time, experts estimated that only 3% of the population was really interested in and passionate about classical music, and they worried that unless that percentage rose to 4%, then classical music would disappear for lack of support.

But for Zander, the idea of pushing for an increase from 3% to 4% wasn't good enough — it was way too small. He was holding out for 100%. Here's what he says: "How would you walk, how would you talk, how would you be if you thought everybody loves classical music; they just haven't found out about it yet."

Zander's vision for the future of classical music is a story of possibility, which lies at the heart of what he believes not only about music, but about humanity. He's careful, though, to distinguish between possibility and positive thinking. Positive thinking, he says, is pretending something, a situation, is good when it isn't; possibility is the act and the language of creation.

He tells a story, about his father, Walter Zander, who was a Jewish refugee from Germany, who fled to England in 1937.² Although Walter's parents and many members of his extended family were killed in the Nazi death camps, nevertheless, during the height of WWII, Walter was declared by the British Government to be an enemy alien, and was sent to an internment prison camp on the Isle of Man. He was there with 2000 other men, all as fearful and confused and disoriented as he was, and yet, even in that situation, he saw possibility. He noted that many of his fellow prisoners had education and skills that they could share, and so he had the thought that they should start a kind of university, which they did. They held 46 classes a week: with no books or paper and pens, or other supplies — just people talking to one another. 46 classes a week. A result not of pretending or positive thinking, but of possibility.

How would *we* walk, how would *we* talk, how would *we* be if we thought about how we are to live and move and relate in this world in terms of possibility. What if we committed to the possibility that everyone — not just 4%, but everyone, deep down yearns to be connected and would delight in seeing themselves and their neighbors, strangers and enemies, exactly as God sees them: but they just haven't gotten that message yet. They haven't — for whatever reason — received the message in a way they could hear...in their own language.

And so we are reminded, this Pentecost Day, that as descendants of those early disciples, we, too, are connected to the powerful, unseen tidal

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https://www.ted.com/talks/benjamin_zander_life_lessons_from_beethoven_s_symphony_no_9?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare

rhythms of God, called to proclaim and embody the truth of love and welcome and justice for all of humanity: Medes and Parthians, believers and skeptics, people of every orientation and identification. In a time rife with upheaval and uncertainty, vitriol and divisiveness, we are invited to see what is around us not with pretend positive thinking, but with the clear-eyed hope of possibility. God's disturbing Spirit isn't done with us yet. *Amen.*