

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Making the World New: A New Spirit  
The Rev. Bethany Peerbolte  
May 31, 2020, Day of Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-22

Happy Pentecost Church! This is a holiday that celebrates the Holy Spirit becoming the continuing presence of God in our world. It is the day the early church leaders received the Holy Spirit and were able to interpret scripture and speak in all the languages they needed to spread the message of God's love. Many think of Pentecost as the birth day of the church, however, I don't agree that a birthday is the best analogy for what happened on Pentecost. The way I see it, when someone is born they are not particularly useful. Cute, yes, but babies are very limited in their abilities. When we are born we depend on others to take care of us for many years. The women and men who received the Spirit on Pentecost were not dependents. They were gifted with remarkably helpful abilities to proclaim the message of God's love. They no longer depended on the guidance of others. They were able to understand scripture and interpret it for the masses. They quickly went off on their own to pursue careers in ministry. This was not a birth day, it was a graduation day.

Graduations are the tipping point from learning to doing. Before graduation, we are students. We gain knowledge, gather experience, and sharpen our abilities. We need teachers to guide us and check our work. After some time, though, the teachers recognize we have collected enough knowledge and experience and have sharpened our gifts enough to allow us to go out on our own. We are given a degree that signifies we have achieved a level of expertise that makes our words and our ideas worth listening to. We can see problems and brainstorm solutions in a way that is helpful and worthy of respect.

This is what happened to Jesus' followers. They graduated from being students of Jesus to leading the people of God. Their degree shows up like a flame over their heads, which would be very cool if that happened to us, but it is a little harder to recognize when the Spirit enters our lives. Even though we have never had a flame dance over us, scripture assures us we have all received the same Spirit. God pours out the Spirit on "all flesh," it says. Some say the Spirit comes to us in baptism. Others say confirmation is the moment. You may have experienced a different moment where you were convinced of the Spirit's presence within you. No matter when the Spirit arrives, we are all graduates and hold the same degree.

You are probably wondering what that degree is exactly. Paul recalls the words of Old Testament prophets to remind the crowd that God said, "In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams."

Paul is saying the last days have begun. I realize reading this 2000 years later takes some of the punch out of Paul's declaration. It actually reminds me of a friend I had in college who had a dark sense of humor and whenever I asked him how he was doing he would say "dying," because every day lived is one of his last. So the "last days" is all very relative.

But no matter how many last days we have left, Paul is marking this moment as the time when the Spirit of God is poured out on all flesh. It has been poured out. There will now be visions and dreams and prophecy, by the young and the old. Women and men, even the slaves, the most oppressed among them, who no one ever listens to, will be given the same measure of the Spirit. They hold the same degree. The degree we have been given on Pentecost is a degree of prophecy. We have all graduated into the profession of prophets.

Some of us may have gotten our degrees a long time ago and have forgotten what was taught in "Being a Prophet 101," so let's look at what it means to be a prophet.

Many languages translate the English word prophet from something that means a foreseer. Someone one who foresees the future. In Hebrew, the meaning is more like a messenger or microphone, someone who projects a message from God. The Old Testament talks about prophets in this way, a prophet is “a person of God” “a messenger of God” “a noticer” “a watcher for the people.” In the New Testament, the Greek words translate to something like “to speak in front of, or in place of.”

So the scriptural understanding of the role of a prophet is to speak in place of God. Prophets carry a message from God. They are given the task to watch the world around them on behalf of the people. A prophet is someone who has a connection to God, who understands what God wants for the world, and gives that message to the people. This is a little different than how we often think of prophets. We tend to think of them more like fortune tellers, people who can predict the future, however, there is a very important distinction to make between someone who predicts things and someone who sees things.

Here is an example to help understand the difference.

If we are in a raft paddling down a river and I notice the water is beginning to flow faster, I might say to everyone in the boat, “Looks like the water is going a bit faster than before. I wonder if there is a waterfall up ahead.” Everyone in the boat might assume I don’t know what I’m talking about and ignore me. If a few yards up I see a sign that says, “Waterfall ahead,” I would point it out to everyone. Some people might finally listen, but maybe the majority still does not believe the danger is real and we stay on course. If we then come to a waterfall it does not mean I predicted the future like a fortune teller does. It means I was paying attention to our present surroundings and noticed the warning signs of the potential dangers ahead. The fact that my warning came true might make it look like I have some special ability, but in reality anyone who was paying attention would have seen the same thing.

Here is a more biblical example. If the major empires are at war with each other, saying “Empires are about to fall,” is not a mystically inspired statement of the future. It’s simply stating that what is happening now: war will lead to an empire falling. Unless something changes, an empire falling, is the direction of the present path.

The prophets of the Bible do not predict the future, they live with a watchful eye and notice disconnects between what God wants for the world and where the current path is leading us. Moses was introduced to a loving God who yearned for equality. So Moses saw people in slavery and knew that was not what God wanted to have happen. Once Moses identified the disconnect, he went to the people to tell them God wanted them to be free. Most people did not believe him. SO, he and God got to working on a plan to free the people from slavery to help God’s vision become a reality.

Prophets pay attention in the present, and when things do not line up with God’s will they set out to help alert people to the disconnect.

The way prophets do this varies. Hosea (hoe-zeh-a) used his life choices, especially his marriage, to be a metaphor about the disconnect he saw. Hosea is the one who married a sex worker and every time she went back to that line of work Hosea forgave her. This showed how Israel kept abandoning the One God for their old gods, but that the One God was forgiving. Miriam used song to proclaim God’s message and align the people with God’s will. Deborah played out her prophecy professionally, taking on the job of a judge to help guide the people down God’s path. But the two major ways prophets alert the world to a disconnect is with words and actions.

Nathan is a good example of a prophet who used words. When King David killed Uriah (U-reye-uh) to get to Bathsheba, Nathan came to the King to tell a story about a rich man stealing from a poor man. David was appalled at the actions of the rich man. Nathan then revealed that the story was actually about David stealing Bathsheba from Uriah. David saw the disconnect and repented.

Ezekiel is my favorite prophet who used actions to alert the world to a disconnect. He built a little replica of Jerusalem on a brick. With siege walls and battering rams, and camps all around it. Then he laid in the middle of the city on his left

side for 390 days. One day for every year Israel would be uncomfortable under the rule of another nation if they did not change their ways. Then he laid on his right side for 40 days. One day for every year Judah would be under the rule of another nation. One would think it would be hard to ignore the message of someone in the middle of the public eye in such an unusual position, but many thought this was not the right way to get a message across and demeaned Ezekiel's actions.

The way a prophet gets God's message across is as varied as there are prophets, but the way they are all the same is that they are witnesses to a present path that is not heading in the direction God wishes us to go. They are witnesses to a disconnect. They all find a way to alert people and say, "Hey, I know what God wants for us, and I see the path we are on and this path is not going to lead us where God wants us to be. We need to make a course correction if we are going to make the world the way God wants it." Does everyone always listen to prophets? Not normally, but prophets are relentless in their critique of things that are not working. If one method of prophecy isn't working, they find another way to reach the people. Eventually enough people agree with the prophet and they find a way to repent and correct their course.

When Pentecost happened, we all received a degree in prophecy. We received the Spirit, the connection to God needed to sense these disconnects. We were entrusted with the task to speak God's message into the world.

The Good news is that we are not perfect prophets at graduation. You were not a great doctor, or teacher, or artist the minute that degree landed in your hand. All that degree does is say you know enough to get to work. We hone our skills further with every day we do the work of a prophet. Unfortunately, many of us prophets have not clocked into work for a while and have let our degrees collect dust. The messages we were created for and commissioned to tell are not being told. Pentecost is our time to remember to witness to the disconnects in our world. We have been given a specific language, and specific message that we alone can tell.

We can all think of at least one disconnect. A direction humanity is heading that is not the direction God wants us to be going. Those disconnects ring inside us as disgust and anger and dread. The Spirit yells from inside us giving us visions of a better world. We dream dreams of a day when the disconnect is set right. We cannot let these visions and dreams die inside us. They are the prophecies; the messages God has tasked us to give to the world.

We will each use different tactics to get the message into the world.

For some of us that message will be told with words as we teach our children to think in a different way. Words that remind friends and family that jokes that hurt are not funny. We may use words of poetry and song to inspire hard hearts to listen closer to God's will. Our words may not even be heard by many, possibly only read by one senator or one police chief. Our way may be with words that highlight the disconnect between what God wants for us and the direction we see our world heading.

For some of us, God's message will be told by our actions. The friends we choose, the places we spend our money, the people we vote for. We may choose to act by lying face down at the capital building with hundreds of other prophets. We may never say a word and yet the disconnect becomes clear when people see how we make decisions and the way we choose to live our lives.

The prophets reality, unfortunately, is that the world may not listen to what is obviously happening around them. There is a force all prophets work against. We can call it fear, or lack of confidence, or the devil, but there is a force that works to convince us we are helpless to right the course of our world. Every time someone does not listen, every time an attempt is made and fails to inspire change, our willingness to continue working as prophets falters. This force was what told Jonah to run the other way, away from his prophetic message.

But the story of Jonah tells us that the Spirit is stronger than this opposing force. That God's message will find a way into the world. That one may want to run in the other direction to hide and yet still a prophet will end up in the exact

place where God uses their voice to shout with every ounce of God's distress, "You've got him down, let him breath at least."

Pentecost is the day all flesh, young and old, men and women, especially the oppressed were tasked with carrying the message of God into the world. We have been uniquely calibrated to sense the disconnects between what God wants for us and the direction we are heading. We are not helpless. We are the help!

That help will manifest in any number of ways and it comes from the Spirit's unrest within us. We cannot let the forces of fear and self-doubt convince us to run from the messages we have been given to proclaim. Imagine if every one of us, made in God's image, gifted with God's Spirit, speak the truth of the disconnects we witness in our world and listen to one another's messages. Can you see that vision? Can you dream that dream? Will you proclaim that prophecy?

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.