

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Encouragement Along the Way: The Spirit  
The Rev. John Judson  
June 9, 2019

Joel 2:23-29; Acts 2:1-13

It was his graduation day. It should have been an exciting day to be getting his BA after six years of effort. Even so, he began to cry. And the tears were not tears of joy but of worry; worry, because he knew how much debt he and his family had taken on; two-hundred thousand dollars. He had no idea how they would ever pay it back. As he sat at graduation though, something happened. The speaker made this young man and his classmates a promise and in that promise, he found hope. The promise? His debt would be paid, in full. The speaker, Robert Smith, the wealthiest African American in the United States, as he was delivering the commencement address at Morehouse College, promised that he would pay off all the outstanding loans of the graduating class. At first the students did not know what to say or do. However, it did not take them long to express their delight and gratitude. Mr. Smith and the school are now working out all the arrangements so that the promise will be kept and a group of young adults will begin their lives with encouragement to make a difference not only for themselves but for others.

The people in the time of Joel were looking for encouragement as well. Joel was preaching and making promises about four-hundred years before the birth of Christ. The people were needing hope because they were in the midst of a horrible famine and they were a subject people of the Persian Empire. And so they turned to the two promises of Joel in which to find hope. The first was that the famine, worse than any in the memory of his audience, would come to an end; that God would act and once again make the land fruitful. The second promise was that one-day God's Spirit would appear and transform humanity; that not just men would prophecy, but that men and women, young and old, free and slave, Jew and Gentile would all be filled with the presence of God and they would be able to declare what God has done, is doing and will do in the future. This was a radical promise that probably seemed more like a campaign slogan than a real promise of God. The outcome of these promises? The first was fulfilled in a season or two. The second...well it faded into memory as years, decades and centuries passed. While the famine ended, the Spirit never came...at least until the day of Pentecost.

The story of Pentecost is one of those exciting yet frightening stories that fill the Bible. It is exciting. It is exciting because we watch a bunch of frightened, confused Galileans, in hiding out in an upper room, unsure of what to do, be suddenly turned into a cadre of fearless Good News tellers. Luke describes it as a moment in which the Spirit, appearing like a powerful wind and tongues of fire, swept over all the disciples, men and women, young and old giving them the power they needed to overcome their anxious hearts and then shooting them out into the street to tell people about Jesus and the coming Kingdom of God. It is also frightening because we watch a bunch of frightened, confused Galileans, in hiding out in an upper room, unsure of what to do, be suddenly turned into a cadre of fearless Good News tellers because the Spirit, appearing like tongues of fire, flickering over all the disciples, men and women, young and old gave them the power they needed to overcome their anxious hearts and then shot them out into the street to tell people about Jesus and the coming Kingdom of God.

While we may want to stop the story of Pentecost with that exciting and frightening moment, we ought not to do so. We shouldn't do so because it was only the beginning of what the Spirit was going to do. Just like the wind of God that brought order out of chaos in the first creation, here the breath of God was bringing chaos out of order for a new creation. This chaos was that all flesh, all people were now elements of a new creation. Men, women, slave, free, rich and poor were given spiritual gifts; gifts that the Spirit gives to everyone who believes. These gifts include preaching, teaching, caring, loving, giving, encouraging, hosting and even healing and speaking in tongues. All people were given the fruit of the Spirit, transforming them into new people. Fruits included love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness and self-control. And it is these gifts and fruits that created a radical new religious community. It becomes this wonderful amalgam of Jews and Gentiles, free people and slaves, men and women, rich and poor, citizen and foreigner all drawn together and empowered by the Spirit to love, serve and share. And this is why there is still hope and encouragement in this place...in this community...because the Promise is still real...that the Spirit is still pouring itself out in power.

This year marks the 185<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of this church. And in each of those years the Spirit has been here making this a place of hope and encouragement. The Spirit has seen this congregation through the Civil War, two World Wars, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Civil Rights Movement, integration, and the movement toward the full inclusion of persons of all races, genders and sexual-orientations into the life of the church. The Spirit led us to be one of the first churches to ordain women and members of the LGBTQ community as elders and deacons. The Spirit led us to actively worked for low income housing in Birmingham. The Spirit led us to create one of the only full inclusion programs in our denomination for persons with disabilities. The Spirit continues to push us to work with partners in Detroit, Pontiac, Mexico and Kenya touching the lives of men, women and children. The Spirit continues to pour itself out on our children and on every generation from the Greatest, to Boomers, Busters, Millennials, Gen X and beyond. The Spirit gifts us for the building of the body of Christ. The Spirit gives us the fruits of the Spirit to make life richer and fuller. The Promise is being fulfilled in us. And what I perceive is that the Spirit is pushing us out of the doors of this place to do something great for Jesus Christ. That we are set to tell in word and in deed about God's all-embracing Kingdom and change the world for the better; that a new transformation is upon us. This is the hope, this is the encouragement.

My challenge then is for each of us to ask ourselves, "What is it that the Spirit is empowering me to do for Christ and the world", then to go and do it.