

*God's People Unsheltered*

Acts 2

Rev. Cameron Barr

May 23, 2021

Being here with all of you - under this open awning - makes me think about how our church must first have gathered. We think of our history largely in terms of our building - and we relate to our church today so much around our building - that it may be difficult to conceive of being a church without a building. The past year has given us a little taste of that. What's it been like?

Maybe a little harder to make connections?

Maybe we keep up with a smaller group of people because there's no place and time to meet the crowd?

Maybe we really miss the energy of being together.

This is how many of our ancestors in faith would have worshipped. The preacher would travel from place to place - wherever he could count on finding a few folks. You wouldn't "go to church" so much as church would "come to you." Actually the founders of our church - people like James O'Kelley, who established several Christian churches around Orange, Chatham, and Alamance counties - were pretty good at this kind of thing. They were revival preachers who didn't need a building to bring the church together.

My intention is not to sentimentalize the past. I know these frontier churches were full of people who lived hard and violent lives. And we might be ashamed to take a peek at their record on slavery and reconstruction. Did people in our faith tradition really say those things? And by talking about this history without proud buildings I in no way want to minimize the labor and generosity of those who came before us to build a future where we would have a building.

But - with all these things in mind. The imperfections of our predecessors. The possibilities and limitations of our building. As we stand outdoors on the Day of Pentecost - this is a fine occasion to remember how God has called the church to gather in many different ways. And how God has called many different communities into the company of Christ Jesus. The Pentecost is nothing but a surprise - an unexpected gift - to those who had not the faintest idea that Christ would be found among them.

Luke revels in the story of how the Holy Spirit snuck up on them. Throughout his retelling there is a sense of - Here? Now? Among these people? Of all people, among these people? Even the most "devout Jews" from every nation living in Jerusalem felt the movement of the Spirit of that day. "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, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs - in our own languages we hear them speaking of God's deeds of power."

The Pentecost event becomes a defining story of the Christian tradition. To show how God will speak through you whoever you are. To demonstrate that God can find you wherever you are. To illustrate how the Spirit lives in the differences between us.

They were at a table, but that's all the ecclesial imagery Luke uses. There's no church, no steeple, not even an altar or a tabernacle or a cross. Luke says they were dining in a house - no details of the structure, but it must have been a modest one. And in any event it did not keep them safe from the wind of the Spirit that blew among them.

So it's just as well that we are here on the portico. Because even if we were inside we would still be unprotected from the surprises that God has in store.

Thus says the Lord - I will breathe life into these dry bones. I will bring you up from your graves. And I will put my spirit within you. And you shall know that I am the Lord your God, and I will speak my life into you; and you will not forget how I have acted on your behalf.