Acts 2:1-21

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"Great Balls of Fire!"

Although there are days for all of us when we take a loving look around and our spirits sing with Louis Armstrong, *What a Wonderful World,*[1] it is also true that most of us can acknowledge that there is a gap between the world as it is and the world we can imagine. We see natural disasters that cause immense suffering, sometimes compounded by governmental incompetence or indifference. We see the unjust ordering of the world in which over-consumption and malnutrition are both huge health problems—at the same time! We see warring clans and competing ideologies, ignorance and fear and hatred and cruelty. But we can imagine it otherwise: a world in which differences are respected, peace flourishes, justice prevails and prosperity is shared. We can imagine this! In principle it seems so tantalizingly simple. In real life it is so frustratingly elusive. Are we growing more and more like the ideal world we can imagine? I don't know.

This is why there is a whole category of religious thought called "eschatology." It means literally, the study of the end times, how things will be by and by. To be sure, eschatology has been a seething repository of religious goofiness; a left field of pseudo study in which people take a few obscure verses of scripture, quote them out of context and fashion bizarre world views. But at its heart eschatology addresses a deep human yearning: the hope that some day, some way, all of this will get straightened out.

Jesus was sometimes speaking eschatologically when he talked about the Kingdom or Empire of God.[2] He taught us to pray for this coming of God's Reign when we pray, "thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Every week that I preach I send you out with the same benediction, which includes the admonition to go forth with "hope for the coming Reign of God." We live with a yearning that God's will be done. We pray for it. We hope for it. We work for it. And we wait.

As we wait, some people envision a great coming cataclysm to usher in the eschaton: goodness, gracious, great balls of fire! But the story of Pentecost gives us a very different vision.

Like us, they were waiting. The disciples were all together in one place, both physically and spiritually. Gradually the fear in which they had huddled since Jesus' crucifixion had begun to recede. They didn't know how long they would have to wait. They didn't know exactly what they were waiting for. But they had the audacity to continue to trust in Jesus' promise. They had been told, "… stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:49) So they waited.

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[1] Though closely identified with Armstrong, the song was written by George Weiss and Bob Thiele.

[2] Sometimes, but not always! He was also a forceful advocate for the reordering of society. Luke presents the clearest expression of Jesus' social views. For example, he uses the word "rich" thirteen times in Luke, and almost every instance points to a redistribution of wealth. And Acts, also written by the author of Luke, portrays the first Christians as sharing all possessions in common.

Were they expecting Jesus to return with great balls of fire? When the promised visitation finally comes, what they get is surprising. It's fire, all right. But it comes divided into little flickering tongues of flame. A sound like the rush of a mighty wind ushers in the arrival of these tongues, which are accompanied by extraordinary spiritual gifts—gifts with a purpose. The followers of Jesus are empowered to speak in other languages as the Spirit gives them ability. Onlookers from every unpronounceable place in the ancient world are astonished to hear the disciples testifying in their own languages about "God's deeds of power."

Power with a purpose: the disciples are energized, ecstatic, enlivened. It is uproarious. The first interpretation of cynical bystanders is that they are on a cheap drunk: "They are filled with new wine."

The effect and indeed the purpose of this spiritual visitation is to make the church truly the church; which is to say that it is suddenly and dramatically by many orders of magnitude more diverse. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the "disciples," students—become "apostles," those who are sent out. This closed and cloistered circle of timidity becomes a dynamic and combustive explosion of good news. Immediately they reach out across barriers of language, culture and race. They begin to tell the Gospel story, the story of the love of God revealed through Jesus Christ, in a thousand different ways. "In our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." The one message becomes many. And through the one message the many peoples become one. And the work is just beginning.

But what is going on here? What is happening? What does it mean? Peter leaps to his feet and shouts above the din to interpret: "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning." (Who knows what will happen at the 11:00 service!) "No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.'"

Do you hear what Peter is saying? Hey, everybody! Welcome to the last days! This thing you're been waiting for? It's starting to happen! Your yearning for a different world… your yearning for the Realm of God… your aching for the oneness of humankind, for love between us and justice among us: this is the sign!

And what is the sign? That a certain chosen few will behave as though they are drunk? There's limited value in that even as entertainment. No, the sign is that *all* people will receive the Spirit! "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." That doesn't mean they will foretell the future; it means they will forth-tell the present, telling of the ways that God is present and active and God is still speaking. And who is it that will prophesy? *All* God's people! If we were people who say "Amen," somebody should say it right now! All God's people!

So this is how it is: not great balls of fire, but tiny tongues of flame; not a great and sudden cataclysm but a constant, insistent, irresistible outpouring of the Spirit; not something that just happens to us, but something that happens through us; and it heals

wounds and crosses cultures and overcomes barriers and it brings us close to God because it is the working of God within us. And as God works within us God makes visible through us a little glimpse that lets us know that God's will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven. And this happens within *all* of us!

So… wherever the church with its message of justice and love is reaching out to bridge gaps of language, culture and race—and yes, even religion—there is where Pentecost is happening. Wherever men and women, young and old are taking risks for love and justice, acting in spite of their fear, living in a way that offers the world even a little tiny glimpse of what the world can be like when God is in charge, there Pentecost is happening. Wherever the church is becoming more diverse in its people, its forms of communication, its outreach and its ministries, Pentecost is happening. Wherever Christ is more visible: not as doctrine or as ritual or as the steeple on the corner but as the incarnate love of God; wherever love is made more real and its triumph over the powers of death is proclaimed; wherever the power of God is incarnate in lives and manifest in social systems that are transformed, there Pentecost is happening.

Welcome to the end times! Are we drunk? No, this is the Reign of God, that we yearn for and hope for and pray for, breaking into our world, praise God. Pentecost is happening.

And it happens every day. God feeds us every day, sustains us every day, supports us every day in the ongoing struggle for justice and peace. Wherever people gather and God's love is announced through the cleansing waters of baptism; wherever bread is broken and the cup is shared; wherever lives are touched by the Word of God and gathered people disperse with a determination to live lives that are more faithful, Pentecost is happening.

Welcome to the last days where everything is different. Come to the table to receive strength for the journey, gifts for the challenge of living as God's redeemed, resurrected people, and to find your own specific voice, your language of love to proclaim God's deeds of power.

Come to the table to let Pentecost happen in you.

Amen

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