

Pentecost: A Graduation Prayer
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
June 5, 2022

The Pentecost story is a wonderful scripture for Graduation Sunday. Listen now to how God may be speaking to you through the scripture today.

Acts 2: 1–21

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2**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.

3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4**All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6**And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

7Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? **8**And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9**Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10**Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11**Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

12All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” **13**But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Fellow Jews and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ AMEN

The Holy Spirit, life-giving, unpredictable, powerful, blew into Jerusalem on that Pentecost, renewing hope, creating visions, inspiring dreams. Pentecost is called the birthday of the church because by the end of that day in Jerusalem, a movement of 120 became over 3,000 strong. Praying together, sharing their resources, devoting themselves to Christ’s teaching, healing and justice-making, people began the adventure of learning about Jesus, listening to God, and discovering what it means to be the church. And it continues to this day.

Where God’s spirit blows, nothing is ever quite the same, all things are made new. Whether that’s in the church as we pledge to listen for God’s voice which can lead us to fresh ways of loving God and doing justice, or individually, as we experience forgiveness and relationships are healed, or when we find the energy to carry on despite exhaustion and discouragement. Or in our world, when, despite obstacles that keep

popping up, the Spirit is alive in people of good faith who act boldly to ensure that all people can flourish and the earth is preserved.

Jesus told his disciples to stay in Jerusalem to await the coming of the Holy Spirit. Surely, they wondered how they were going to carry on without their teacher by their side. One chapter of their lives was over, and a new one was about to begin.

And so, it is with graduation, an ending and a beginning, always filled with excitement and anxiety.

So, Tedo, Mary, Hannah, Lily and Daniel, here is my Pentecost prayer for you as you begin a life beyond high school, and Sara, for you, as you end your exchange year in Bloomington and head back to Spain. It's really a prayer for us all because life is about endings and beginnings, and the Spirit, with her breath of assurance, consolation, disturbance, and energy, is in them all.

Dear friends, may God's Spirit give you courage in all things

Following Jesus never was, and never will be the easy. Christ's teachings challenge powers, policies and cultural norms that deny the image of God in people. Being yourself, taking a stand for the rights of all, and protecting the earth takes courage. Courage is not the absence of fear, but acting despite that fear.

Seeing these sunflowers here in honor of Ukraine reminded me of a remarkable story that author Phillip Yancey wrote about the 2004 Ukrainian election ¹in which Victor Yushchenko challenged the incumbent party and nearly died for it, he was poisoned.

¹ <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/december/4122710.html> ; Yancey, Phillip, *What Good is God?*

On election-day the exit polls showed Yushchenko with the lead, but because of fraud, the government had reversed those results. That evening the state-run television reported, “Ladies and gentlemen, we announce that the challenger Victor Yushchenko has been decisively defeated.”

However, government authorities had not taken into account that Ukrainian television provided translation for the hearing-impaired. On the small screen insert in the lower right-hand corner of the television screen a brave woman, Natalia Dmytruk, raised by parents who were deaf and mute, gave a message in sign language. She said, “I am addressing all the deaf citizens of Ukraine. Don't believe what they say. They are lying, and I am ashamed to translate these lies. Yushchnko is our President!” No one in the studio understood her radical sign-language message.

Inspired by that courageous translator, those hearing impaired led what became known as the Orange Revolution.

Yancey writes, “They text-messaged their friends about the fraudulent elections, and soon other journalists took courage... and likewise refused to broadcast the party line. Over the next few weeks as many as a million people wearing orange flooded the capital city of Kiev to demand new elections. The government finally buckled under the pressure, consenting to new elections, and this time Yushchenko emerged as the undisputed winner.”

We continue to witness the Spirit moving as people march, protest and harness energy in the face of unjust practices and laws.

You, graduates, have courageously grown into your authentic selves. You have boldly held onto hope during these last two very hard years and have found your voices, which is huge.

And... it takes courage to do ordinary things, too, like leaving home, traveling, beginning college, making new friends and discovering who you are apart from your parents and hometown.

The Spirit has equipped you with everything you need to be the people God has created you to be. Let the Spirit blow you out of your comfort zone for the sake of God's compassion and justice. And when you don't feel so courageous? Call upon God and call upon us, we are here for you, for together we are stronger.

May the spirit enable you to listen beyond words

Perhaps the ability to listen is the real miracle of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit allowed people who spoke different languages to understand each other. The streets were crowded that day and there was noise everywhere, but those who tuned in could understand stories about God's works of power and love spoken in their own language. We SO need the Spirit today to help us listen beyond the noise to the truth that God has for us. Sometimes it feels like everyone, everywhere, is talking and very few are actually listening.

So, listen to your heart. Listen to your life. Listen for God, who seeks to speak through the cacophony of voices in the world today. Listen to those with whom you disagree. Listen to those whose voices have long been silenced. Listen before you speak. Let the Spirit's wisdom allow you believe experiences unlike your own and expand your circle of care. Listening is the beginning of healing.

I so appreciate how you graduates use multiple modes of communication, yes, texting, Instagram, etc., but also art, protest, music, dance, athletics. You are listening to the cries of those who suffer and are speaking the truth to power. Your generation is teaching us all that this day and time require new ways of communicating love and relating

to one another. You are helping build a culture of empathy and empowerment and this brings me great hope.

And finally, may the Spirit nurture in you a sense of curiosity, wonder and awe.

The book of Acts tells the Pentecost story poetically using metaphor, hyperbole, descriptive and evocative language to describe... well, the indescribable. The Bible is full of poetry, it is the language of the heart, it is the language of God. As spiritual beings, we crave poetry in the broadest sense of the word. Hearts and minds are not transformed with facts and figures, but with words and story, images that move our souls and hearts. We need more than facts to feed our souls.

Please don't let the demands of a rigorous academic schedule detract from the wonders of God all around us. Be open to the poetry of everyday life, and your heart will rest with God. Breathe. Drink water. Take a nap. Pray a lot and use words when you can. Crack open the Bible once in a while and be inspired and challenged. Lose yourself in art or music or dance or running. Notice a sunset. Hug with a friend.

And when your heart bursts with wonder and awe in the ordinary movements of your life and study, or as you grasp the sweeping breath of movement in the lives of others and the world, you will experience Pentecost.

So, dear ones, on this Graduation Sunday, may God's spirit give you courage to be Christ's people, may God's Spirit enable you to listen deeply, and nurture a sense of curiosity and wonder in this beautiful, heart-breaking world that needs you so badly.

Know that you are loved. God believes in you and so do we!

Thanks be to God. AMEN