

“The Spirit Makes a Splash”
The Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
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Pentecost Sunday
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Acts 2:1-21

Early in the morning on Easter Sunday, just before dawn, I clattered the metal fire pit out of my car trunk and carried it to the dock at Overpeck Park. On my second and third trips back to the car, I hauled logs, a small table, and a neatly packed bag of matches and a lighter, communion elements, a bottle of water, and a bowl. Before the first worshippers arrived, the scene was set before the rising sun: white cloth gently flapping in the breeze, bowl carrying a reminder of baptismal promises, the table set with the meal Jesus left us, and a small fire crackling, traditional in the Easter Vigil, a sign of light in the darkness and of Jesus as Light of the World. With worshippers ready to greet the dawn and greet the Risen Christ, all was complete.

I learned more than a month later that some of those worshippers, including a former fire chief of the Leonia FD, were a little nervous while they heard the good news of Jesus’ resurrection that Easter morning. One kept looking over his shoulder to see if the police would rush in to cancel our Easter worship and cite the church with a violation of the open flame ordinance.

Oops. Next year, maybe a lantern will be a safer way to represent the light of Christ.

Fire can be a powerful and frightening thing. And yet, that is how the Holy Spirit made a splash on that Pentecost day, arriving with a violent, rushing wind that surrounded and filled all those early followers of Jesus.

Fire? Violent, rushing wind? When we think of blazing flames, or violent winds, when we think of rushing water, our minds probably go to natural disasters: tornadoes in the Midwest, wildfires in California, the Mississippi River flooding over its levees and soaking the farmland all around it. Biblical theologian Marcus Borg compared the fire and the wind and the speaking in tongues as a mirror to the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis. There, the men of the Earth decide to build a tower that goes all the way up to heaven, so that they can really make a name for themselves. But when The Lord saw what they were building, God said, “Look, they are one people, and they all have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they

propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So, the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth." (Genesis 11:5-9). While the story of the Tower of Babel does not describe a natural disaster, it does seek to explain the reason behind a humanity that is divided by language and region: how humanity lost its unity.

But when the Holy Spirit made a splash, it is the opposite of what we saw in Babel. The multitude of languages is a movement towards unity rather than division. It is a sign of the universal nature of the gospel, that the good news belongs to all people, of every gender, every nation, every tongue, every age, and every class.

"I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh," God spoke through the prophet Joel. Sons and daughters shall prophesy. Youth will see visions; the elders will dream dreams. Even slaves will receive the Spirit and prophecy.

Last week I heard about someone stepping outside his routine experience to speak a language that was much less familiar to him. It was the last day of school for 6-year old Matias. But Matias, who is on the Autism spectrum, was refusing to go to school. Transitions can be quite challenging, and the idea of going from school where there is a reliable schedule and rhythm to the more relaxed days of summer just felt too overwhelming for Matias. When his mom brought his brother to school, she caught sight of Matias' teacher and asked if they could Facetime her son, to convince him to come to school. That trick did not work. Then, the principal came by. He asked Matias if he knew what was on the lunch menu that day, which got Matias curious. Then the principal asked, "Well, buddy. Would it help if I just walk over to your house and pick you up to go to school? I've never been to your house!" "Yeah, yeah! That would work!" the boy exclaimed with excitement, and within minutes the principal had met the boy at his house, and they walked to school together, shooting the breeze, talking about the lunch menu, and about summer plans. The principal was able to connect in a language this boy could understand, and in this connection the boy was no longer stuck and could enjoy his last day of first grade.

Those gathered from the different nations heard of God's deeds of power in their own language. The Holy Spirit did not limit speech to the language of Empire, not Greek, not of the Galileans, and not even the religious language of the priests. They spoke in every language. They were amazed and perplexed, and they wondered, "What does this mean?"

But instead of letting the question hang, some sneered and brushed aside the wonder of what had happened, shutting down the possibility of God breaking in and suggesting instead a case of early morning drunkenness.

Peter, however, knew better and did not allow the doubters to take control of the narrative. He stood up with the other 11 as backup and interpreted what had happened as the arrival of the Holy Spirit, just as the prophet Joel had spoken.

Whoever controls the narrative has a lot of power. I watched a 4-part series on Netflix called *When They See Us*. It tells of 5 black youth, ages 14-16, who were captured and falsely accused of the rape and near deadly assault of a white woman in Central Park back in 1989. They were denied their civil rights as they were interviewed by police detectives without parents, without lawyers, without food or drink. They were coerced into finally giving confessions, as they were told they could go home once they confessed what they had done. Some of my New York friends remember that time, and how frightened they were of sexual violence. That fear, combined with racist assumptions society had taught them about black men, caused them to believe the narrative that had been painted for them. Ten years after these black boys were arrested and had their youth taken from them, the real perpetrator-- a white man-- confessed to the crime.

Now, Director Ava DuVerney's amazing Netflix series offers a *different* narrative, and it is one that not only exposes the racism of the prosecution at the time, but it also reveals the racism of all those willing to believe the lies they were fed about the danger of young black men.

In Acts, the Holy Spirit made a splash, creating a new narrative that cut across race and all other divisions, and it was life-changing for all willing to receive it. Later in chapter 2, we read that thousands were baptized, and they broke bread together that day. It continues, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need...with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Today, we still enact these ancient and sacred practices in our shared sacraments. Mila is our latest one to be blessed by these signs. Erik Christensen, my dearest friend from seminary and godfather to my child, is the Dean of the Chapel at Lutheran School of

Theology at Chicago. In a recent article, he described the sacraments in this way I wish to share with you now:

“If these are the ritual acts we participate in week after week, they remind us of the reality of God’s good creation and our place in it. The church has an immigration policy, and it’s called **baptism**. In a world deeply divided over national identity, baptism says everyone is welcome. It preserves the integrity of our identities and unites us.’ Similarly, the abundance and sharing of **communion**, in which everyone is fed and there is enough for everyone, challenges ‘a manufactured scarcity in which we work and overwork,’ he said. ***If baptism is the church’s immigration policy, ’communion is our economic policy.’***”

As it turns out, no flaming fire pit is needed for the Holy Spirit to make a splash on us. What we need, we have: bread and juice. We have water. We have the testimony of how others have received the Spirit, how they followed Jesus, and how they understood God. We have one another, in our flesh-- varied in gender and color, diverse in tongue and age, ready to share the narrative for how God is at work in the world. We have our breath-- which in the bible, is the same word used for spirit. With us, and through us, a new and restored creation is coming.