

THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Acts 2:1-21

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Something has been happening ~~over the last 50 years~~ that makes people ask, "What does this mean?" The September 11 terrorist attacks. The warfare in Afghanistan. The violence in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine. What do these events mean? After the latest round of Middle East violence someone grabbed the sleeve of my preaching gown just as I was going into the sanctuary for the worship service. "What do you think it means? I just read the latest in the *Left Behind* series by Tim LeHaye. Is it the beginning of the end?"

On a more personal level we're constantly trying to understand the meaning of everyday events. One of the prettiest young women in the senior class at Oxford smiled pleasantly at a shy junior boy and the boy has been wondering ever since, "What does it mean? Is she in love with me?" You hear the stress filled voice of a relative on the answering machine, "Call me when you get home!" And we ask, "What do you suppose that means?"

We experience mysterious events more often than we're willing to admit. For example, a man who had been married for over 50 years buried his wife. Several months later I was visiting him and he said, "Ted, you're going to think I'm crazy. I was sitting right in the living room last week watching the television and my wife said, 'Can I get you anything in the kitchen?' My wife has been dead for months but there she was. It wasn't a ghost. She looked as real as she ever did and she asked me what she could get for me in the kitchen. Isn't that a ridiculous question? What do you think it means?"

Five hundred years ago when Martin Luther was preaching the Reformation one of the most frequently asked questions was, "How can I get right with God?" That question is still

being asked today but more and more people are asking, "What's the meaning of life?" The question of meaning. Does my paltry life have any meaning?

"What does this mean?" is the question the nations gathered in Jerusalem were asking on the day of Pentecost. They heard and saw something strange and wanted to know what it meant. I love the Greek text in verse 12. Most English translations say, "What does it mean?" But a literal translation of the Greek is, "What does it will to be?" "What does it will to be?" suggests that Someone is trying to communicate a purpose behind the inexplicable events of the day. There's a divine will behind what's happening? We might not understand what's going on, but we trust that there is One who is behind and within the events – One who is directing the events. One who gives meaning to world events as well as our own personal experiences? That One is the Holy Spirit.

I'm trusting the Holy Spirit will help me understand the meaning of what's been happening here in Oxford. In the last ten years I've notice a lot of changes. Oxford has grown in population. Farms have been sold. New housing developments have been built. A Walmart may be coming. Who would have thought, twenty five years ago, that Oxford would be blessed with an influx of retired people living in Ware Presbyterian Village and Jenners Pond? Today we have ethnic and religious diversity as well as life style options which most of us would not have dreamed of fifty years ago. Ten years ago most of the businesses were owned and operated by people who grew up in Oxford. Today Ukrainians run one convenient store, Hindus another, and Greeks a third. Chinese immigrants run several businesses. Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in the nation owning restaurants and stores.. What does it all mean for Oxford?

The Christian church has been called by God to bear witness to the One who gives meaning to otherwise inexplicable events. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, and with our minds steeped in the Biblical narrative, we're called by God to respond to the question of meaning the world is asking. On the Day of Pentecost the early Christians experienced something of the Spirit of God present at creation. Ordinary Christians were filled with the Spirit and began speaking about God. When Pentecost came, people didn't go private. They went loud and public. They spoke in the public forum about God's mighty deeds. Some thought they were drunk. But, nonetheless, they began to engage the culture. And the nations began to ask, "What does this mean?"

Let me briefly tell you what I think it means. I'm just back from a four-day seminar on Strategic Planning in Atlanta, Georgia on Strategic Planning. The purpose of the seminar was to train me to help us discern the meaning of what's happening in Oxford by asking us to answer such questions as who are we? who are our neighbors? what does God want us to be and do in the coming generation? We were warned not to impose our own visions and dreams on our congregation, but to empower you to dream dreams and see visions. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us our sons and daughters prophesy. Our old men and women dream dreams. And we're all empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the wonderful things God is doing in and through the events of our lives.

We can't manipulate the Holy Spirit any more than we can make the wind blow. But we can put up windmills to catch the wind when it starts blowing. One thing we can do is listen to the dreams of old and young. Two months ago we listened to the dreams of a young person expressing his opinions about worship. We need to listen more to the dreams and visions of young people, like Pharaoh listened to the dreams of young Joseph. We need to encourage our

young people to share their dreams with us – recognizing that we older people may have conflicting dreams and visions. But, filled with the Holy Spirit, our young people have more to contribute than we can imagine.

We also need to listen to the dreams and visions of older members. History shapes our personality. What was the vision that founded our church 250 years ago? What visions did our members have during the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War as well as other significant events? Roy Oswald has said, “If we fully know a congregation’s journey in faith, we could unlock it’s future.” I have great confidence that our 250th Anniversary Committee, filled with the Spirit, will discover that the exploration of the past can open up to us a bright future.

Another thing we can do as a congregation is identify the Biblical story that interprets our present experience. Peter found a passage in the Old Testament prophet Joel that interpreted the events of his day. It can be an exciting experience to let the Bible interpret our lives and experience. What is your favorite Bible Story? What Bible story best interprets the life of Oxford Presbyterian Church at the beginning of the 21st century? Filled with the Spirit and attuned to Holy Scripture God reveal to us the meaning of our present history and directs us to do his will in the future.

As the gospel songwriter put it, “We do not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds that future for us!” So, filled with the Spirit, we can remember the past, and learn from it. We can relish the present and live in it. We can respond to the future and lean toward it. Yes – because God fills us with his Spirit. We can’t control the wind of the spirit but we can build windmills. Dream your dreams and share them with one another. Let them be big, but let them be the same dreams that the Crucified and Risen Christ had when he poured out his Spirit on the church on the day of Pentecost.