

Listen to Your Advocate Acts 20:1-21 (Pentecost A)

Now What? What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do sermon series

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Preached May 28, 2023

First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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While we are just east of the region known as Tornado Alley, we are quite familiar with tornadoes, especially this time of year.

On May 22, 2011, a massive EF-5 tornado ripped through Joplin, destroying or damaging 8,000 homes and buildings and claiming 161 lives.

On May 23, 2019, 8 years later, an EF-3 tornado hit Jefferson City, damaging over 628 buildings. Thankfully and miraculously, no one was killed.

In these parts, you learn early on about tornado watches and warnings. The difference between a tornado watch and a tornado warning is this: a watch occurs when the atmospheric conditions are right, and a warning occurs when a tornado has been identified and seen. We keep watch, so we'll be ready to move.¹ My favorite meme about tornado watches and warnings is this one about tacos. A watch means we have the ingredients to make tacos. A warning means we're having tacos. Right now! And, if you end up having Mexican for lunch today, you can thank me for subtly influencing you.

Since Easter Sunday, we've been in a series titled, *Now What: What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do*. We've spent a lot of time with the disciples who tried their best to understand what Jesus wanted for them, pondering all that had happened since the death and resurrection of Jesus, confused, yet prayerful and hopeful about what is next. Ten days ago, Jesus ascended into heaven and told them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. Jesus reminded them that John baptized with water, but they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. (Acts 1:5). They were keeping watch, so they'd be ready to move.

Focused on prayer and community, they waited for God to make the next move. The conditions were right, and suddenly a severe spiritual event occurred, moving beyond the watch phase into a full-on warning. A large group of disciples, both men and women, were gathered in one place when a loud rushing wind filled the place, and tongues like fire hovered over them.

Pentecost is often overlooked in some denominations and faith traditions. We aren't always sure what to do with it. It is concerning for children to hear about tongues of fire landing on people. One little boy, Lionel, was pretty upset after church one Sunday. The mom called his SS teacher, asking what happened in Sunday School this week. The teacher explained that she taught about Pentecost, the holiday considered the birthday of the church. The mother laughed and said, well, that explains it. Pentecost sounds like "Santa Claus," and her son, Lionel, had come home upset, saying Santa Claus was going to come to church on his birthday and light everyone's head on fire.

Pentecost is concerning for adults, too, who get nervous about things we can't control and explain. And what happens at Pentecost in the Upper Room is far beyond control and explanation.

In her book, *Encountering God*, author Diana Eick tells how the church functioned in the Middle Ages.ⁱⁱ It was a dismal period in Europe's long history. Rome had fallen, the economy tanked, and people were desperate for necessities and hope. But in those dark ages, the one bright spot in a local community was the local cathedral, which, as one commentator has said, was like a church-sponsored public works project that gave thousands of people jobs. The cathedrals, built even in small towns, became life's cultural, social, and spiritual epicenter. Some of the most beautiful murals, sculptures, and stained-glass windows were created to tell the stories of faith in pictures for those who could not read.

Pentecost was one of the great holidays celebrated in these cathedrals, and the architecture was built with this special day in mind. The high and ornate ceilings hid trap doors explicitly used for Pentecost. During worship, some of the worshipers would climb onto the roof. And at the appointed time, they would release live doves through the trap doors, through the painted skies and clouds of the ceiling. These doves would come swooping down on the congregation as living symbols of the presence of the Holy Spirit. At that exact moment, choirboys would make whooshing and drumming sounds, and then as the doves swooped and the drumbeats soared, the trap doors would open again, and rose petals would rain down on worshipers like tongues of flame. Who needs high-tech laser shows and fog machines if you have this?

The holes through which the doves swooped, and the petals fell were called "Holy Spirit holes." In such a dark, dismal, and depressing time, one can imagine the power of the theatrical worship moment. A reminder that when God comes into the church, something surprising, beautiful, and wonderfully unexpected almost always happens.

For my first Pentecost as Lead Pastor here at FBC, I thought I'd go big or go home. So, RELEASE THE DOVES. (Just kidding) I'm not even going to joke about releasing the fire. We don't joke about fire around here.

We won't release doves or fire. There is nothing to release anymore. The Spirit of Christ has not left the earth. Instead, we pray to respond to the Spirit, who is still active in the lives of those who seek to show up in the world as Jesus did, leading us to show love and grace in such surprising ways that others may still be amazed.ⁱⁱⁱ

I wonder what the disciples expected when Jesus told them to wait for the promise from the Father and that they'd be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days. For ten days, they imagined while they waited. On that first day of Pentecost, I doubt that's how the disciples of Jesus had planned their day. 7 am, wake up, and morning prayers. 8 am, breakfast. 9 am, violent wind, tongues of fire, Google Translator on steroids, and 3,000 baptized. And it wasn't what the multitudes of devout Jews crowded into Jerusalem from all over were expecting on this annual pilgrimage to the Temple for the Feast of Weeks. Upon hearing the fury of sound, v. 6 tells us, the crowd was bewildered and astounded that they could understand what these from Galilee were saying in their own languages. Some were curious. Others were skeptical, saying, "They're clearly drunk."

But the disciple Peter, yelling over the crowd, says, "We're not drunk. It's only 9 am." I guess it is good that Pentecost occurred in the morning so that no one could blame it on the wine.

Then, Peter preaches a sermon, quoting from the prophet Joel, to testify that what has happened is a fulfillment of Joel's ancient prophecy that a time would come when God would pour out God's Spirit on all people so that people of every race and gender and age would experience God's Spirit and prophesy of the wonders of God, proclaiming the good news in a way that each person could hear and understand. According to seminary professor Dr. Bill Mallard, the miracle of Pentecost is not a miracle of speaking. It is a miracle of hearing and understanding.^{iv}

Before the day was over, the church had grown from 120 gathered to over 3,000. And it wasn't because Peter gave an incredible sermon. It wasn't because they served coffee in the lobby. It wasn't because they had the latest tech or the slickest social media presence. It wasn't because of the style of worship music. And it wasn't because they held a revival with good old hymns and a fiery preacher. It was because the Holy Spirit filled them, empowered them, and when they opened their mouths and lives, they sounded and lived like Jesus. The Spirit of Christ was alive in them as they taught and healed and as they cared for the sick and shared the ever-expanding table.

At Pentecost, the power of God was given to the people of God, and the church was born. God now dwells within the community of Jesus-followers. This living temple is made of people who operate like Jesus, ending fear and oppression with love and peacefully teaching humanity how to love and bless one another.

That morning, the disciples were asking, "Now what?" And I imagine they were still asking it at the end of the day as they sat around, exhausted, exhilarated, and wondering, what next, God? They had waited. They had prayed. They made space in their days, expectations, and hearts so that they were ready to move when God moved. And, oh, how God moved.

The Spirit didn't come when the disciples had it all figured out. The Spirit comes when the wind rushes in, and they're unsure what to do next. The Spirit comes to us when we're overwhelmed by chaos and confusion and when we need it most.

As author, Jan Richardson writes, "Pentecost arrives to remind us that ashes do not have the final word and that fire does not come only to consume. It comes also to bless, to call, to inspire, to give to us what we could never begin to imagine on our own."^v

Waiting is not wasteful, nor is it a withholding of God. Perhaps the waiting seasons in our lives are the seasons God has created for us to make space in our expectations and plans and in our hearts and lives. God-appointed space to teach us to wait faithfully so we'll be ready to move when the Spirit moves us from a watch to a full-blown warning. It happened on that Pentecost Sunday. And it continues to occur as Pentecost is an ongoing transformation of God's people into empowered witnesses who embody Christ's love and grace, proclaiming God's wonders and the Good News in how we live, work, and play.

The disciples had waited. They had prayed. They trusted what Jesus had told them. They made space in their days, expectations, and hearts so that they were ready to move when God moved.

Like those early cathedrals, we need to create some Holy Spirit holes. No, not literal holes in our ceilings to drop doves and rose petals into once a year, although it sounds cool. Maybe next year.

Instead, we need to create and welcome openings and spaces in our lives and this congregation to remind us to wait with expectation. To be Pentecost people who believe that when God comes into our lives, something surprising, beautiful, and wonderfully unexpected almost always happens. We need to be awe-struck and wowed by God's unpredictable Spirit. We need to learn to be people who watch faithfully so we'll be ready to move fearlessly.

Pentecost wasn't a one-time event. It continues to happen. God created and is still creating new communities and empowering us through the Spirit, but we need some form of Holy Spirit holes in our lives.

You've may have never heard of Father Mychal Judge, but you probably have seen this well-known photo of his lifeless body being carried out from the World Trade Center on 9/11. I've covered part of it out of respect. Father Mychal was a Franciscan priest and Chaplain to the Fire Department of New York. He was also the first member of that Fire Department to die in the attack of 9/11. Father Mychal was loved and respected by all the men and women he worked with. Four years after his death, a memorial bench and garden were erected on the shore of Kesh Lake in his home country of Ireland as an oasis for meditation, reflection, and prayer for peace worldwide.

On the bench is inscribed the prayer he was known to start each day with:

*Lord, take me where you want me to go.
Let me meet whom you want me to meet.
Tell me what you want me to say,
and keep me out of your way.*

This is the prayer of one who watched faithfully so he would be ready to move fearlessly when God moved. Without certainty but with clarity, Father Myke began each day with a prayer to create a Holy Spirit hole so the Spirit could be at work in his life, like a rushing wind refusing to stay put, a tongue of fire that warms your heart, or a rushing river that slowly smooths the rough edges in its path and carves out new paths. Could we have the courage to pray this prayer each morning, to surrender our plans and expectations, to be responsive to the Spirit's leading, and to welcome interruptions as possible divine appointments? Could we learn to see the waiting seasons as Holy Spirit holes where God wishes to pour out the power and presence of the Spirit into and through our lives? This kind of daily prayer is only possible when we trust God. This kind of daily surrender is only possible when we are certain God is good and trustworthy.

Could this be the prayer of us as individuals and us as a church: Lord, take us where you want us to go. Let us meet whom you want us to meet. Tell us what you want us to say. And keep us, our preferences, our expectations, our wishes, our limited understanding, out of your way.

In the homily at Father Myke Judge's funeral, friend and fellow Franciscan priest, Father Michael Duffy, concluded with these words: "And so, this morning we come to bury Myke Judge's body, but not his

spirit. We come to bury his voice but not his message. We come to bury his hands but not his good works. We come to bury his heart but not his love. Never his love."^{vi}

The message of Pentecost is that there is no way and no one who can bury or quench the Spirit, the message, the good works, or the Love of God. God's Spirit has come to all – young and old, men and women, the powerful and the oppressed. There are no barriers, and there are no limits to what the Spirit can do through the people of God -IF we keep watch faithfully so we are ready to move fearlessly for the glory of God and the good of the world.

ⁱ *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Volume 2*. 2019, p. 40.

ⁱⁱ <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/a27-the-day-of-pentecost-year-a-2023/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tony Cartledge. *Nurturing Faith Commentary: Lectionary Resources for Preaching and Teaching. Year A: Volume 2*, p. 225.

^{iv} <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2015/05/17/pentecost-what-the-fire-gives/>

^v <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2015/05/17/pentecost-what-the-fire-gives/>

^{vi} <https://www.npr.org/2011/09/09/140293993/slain-priest-bury-his-heart-but-not-his-love>