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Acts 2:1-

GET LOST

This is, in my opinion, one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible. The sweeping fire and wind of Pentecost transforming all the people gathered together so that they can suddenly understand one another. But as much as I like the stories that are in the Bible, what I like even more are the stories that *aren't* in the Bible. I mean the stories behind the stories...the untold parts that lie all around the written tales...the “rest of the story” if you will. I always think that there was more going on than just what got written down, and that is usually much more interesting than the text...even if we have to use our imaginations to fill in some blanks.

This day celebrates the arrival of the Holy Spirit... the force that helps complete our stories and make them whole. In some ways Pentecost is actually the final step of Jesus' resurrection, the appearance of the long-promised messenger and guide for the disciples. In this arrival, the disciples will finally begin to take some ownership and find some direction for their call in life.

Now we don't get much about the aimless, lost part of the disciples' journey. What we get is Luke opening up Acts with another account of the risen Christ and then immediately to the disciples choosing a replacement for Judas. And then in a surprisingly short story, they end up choosing Matthias to replace Judas - and they choose him by casting lots! Casting lots? Really? This is the way that you end up choosing a new person to carry forth the Good News? You draw straws? See, that's the more interesting story to me, the one that isn't being told. What does it say about their sense of direction or guidance at this point that they make really crucial decisions by rolling the dice? I recall Jesus going to the mountaintop to pray, fasting, heading into the wilderness, but nothing about the disciples asking Jesus a question of guidance and him answering, “Hmmm, I don't know. Let's ask the Magic 8-Ball”.

If these disciples have been with the master of living life according to the Spirit for several years now and have learned a whole new way of life but then upon his death have resorted to games of chance to decide the next direction, then they must feel pretty lost. Nothing really strikes me in this early part of Acts as the story of people transformed by Christ; instead I think that we have

some pretty carefully constructed accounts of disciples lost in the wilderness with no compass whatsoever. I think that they were on auto-pilot.

The other day I was driving home from the church and I had one of those moments in time that we have probably all had. I got from 63rd and Portland to the stop light at 33rd and Broadway in Edmond and I could not tell you how I got there. I just didn't remember any of the trip. I could tell you what I passed along the way, but only because I make the trip a lot, not because I remembered any of the details from that actual drive. I am moving, but I do so almost unconsciously...like I'm on auto-pilot. It's not that I don't know where I'm going, but more that I'm not paying attention...I'm lost to what's really happening.

It is a natural reaction to stress, a normal way of sort of "checking out" for a little while...a coping mechanism. And these disciples had a lot to cope with. Their lives had been turned upside more than once. First their invitations from this itinerant rabbi to join the community. Then the numerous ways he blew their preconceived ideas about God and religion off of their hinges. And then the real kicker. He doesn't act like any messiah they expected - he is killed in the most common and brutal fashion available. That would be enough. Yet he has one more bombshell...he lives. Maybe not in the same sense that he did, but he is still among them. It is a lot of change to deal with.

People have a way of approaching change by taming it...by making it routine. I imagine that the disciples did this each time that Jesus surprised them. They found ways to domesticate those revelations. They made them familiar and every day. We all do it in our own ways.

Along one of my regular running routes, I go through Hafer Park in Edmond. As you run along the blacktop trails, you can look to either side and see well-worn trails through the woods. So you can run on trails to get to trails to walk on trails. Have you ever walked through a cow pasture or seen a small dog run? Cows and dogs in particular seem to establish a set pattern. They wear down trails by going over and over in the same pattern. Cows seem to follow the shortest path from point A to point B, while dogs like circles...the widest arc possible. But either way they walk patterns, and they walk them enough to wear the grass down to bare earth. Those paths are clear and unmistakable.

I think that this was what the disciples were doing. They were lost without Jesus right at hand, leading them very directly, and they reverted back to those old paths...those worn down ruts that weren't all that profound or spiritually engaging, but they were the shortest route between A and B. Even as they witnessed something entirely new they did not understand and did what most of us do when faced with a crisis or some completely foreign experience - we revert back to a safe groove...we settle in and switch to auto-pilot. It's not good or bad - in fact, it is the pattern of life. The problem is when we stop looking for or accepting those trips into the wilderness, those chances to get lost.

Here's what I imagine in this Pentecost story. The disciples are still reeling from the execution of Jesus, from their dreams and expectations hanging on a cross. Then they experience Jesus as the

Christ, in a whole new way and that, one might think, should bring them comfort. But instead it is like another tidal wave. It further disrupts their world as Christ calls them to his own work, as the baton is passed and the disciples feel unable or unwilling to take it and run.

The world that Jesus Christ has called them into is unlike anything they have ever known. It asks them to constantly make room at the table and to have the spiritual discipline to love when love seems pointless or even unreasonable. They must deal with a lot of theological and cultural anxieties. Jesus has introduced change that even those “free spirits” are struggling with. It is easy for me to imagine that despite the power of Easter, the disciples feel a bit lost...and maybe unprepared for the place they find themselves in. It’s like they have just completed disciples 101 and yet they’re being asked to defend their disciples PhD dissertation. So it is no wonder that they choose a replacement for Judas by simply drawing straws. They know how to do that.

But I happen to think that there is a big section of the story missing here, because the disciples are in this place of almost complete lack of engagement with the Spirit and then suddenly – whammo! The Spirit arrives like a violent wind. How would they even know what to look for? But it can be exactly what Barbara Brown Taylor calls “wilderness times” that shape us the most. Those times that we think are complete failures are the Holy Spirit’s workshop. That’s exactly the kind of thing She likes.

At some point, with their safety net gone and the path ahead foggy and dark, they found some way to continue. Yes, they run on auto-pilot for awhile and maybe if you asked them months later how Matthias came to replace Judas they wouldn’t be able to remember. They’d say, “Well, I remember that we all welcomed him and everyone hugged and rejoiced, but I don’t really remember the details.” Here, after suffering through what they thought was the death of them all and the end of their dream, they find themselves together. After the thing that they had all discussed in private as the “worst-case scenario” comes to pass, they still find themselves alive and moving...still with that same yearning for what Jesus was teaching them about...still with a longing for the Community of God but no real clear idea how to get there.

What if Pentecost wasn’t this great, powerful moment in time, but rather a slow realization? Now miracles sell better when they happen instantaneously, but I’m much more inclined to think that even when they do happen all at once, we often don’t realize it for awhile. We’re just not attuned to that kind of life. So we realize later the significance of a “chance encounter” or a particular moment...only in the afterglow do we fit enough pieces together to be amazed at what happened. That’s the most common miracle...and it happens *because* they get lost.

I think that as this diverse group of people who had no idea where they were, what they were doing or how to get towards any common goal spent time together, they slowly began to see their commonality in a way that they could never have done if they stayed in their comfort zone, in their well-worn tracks. They gradually found common links, an appreciation for the fact that despite their many differences, they all felt pulled towards God’s vision of wholeness...that even though they expressed that in unique ways the warmth of their hearts was alike. It was a language all to itself.

Nancy Klos told me this story about the last trip to Jinotega. Often times when we visit, the last day before we leave becomes a sort of farewell party and the kids sometimes put together a little sendoff. This time it had some testimonials, if you will. Nancy says that it was the words of a young man at the Albergue that really hit her. As he signed his story, he said that before he came to the school, he didn't know that he was loved. But now he not only knows that he is loved, but also that this love comes from as far away as the United States – from a church on the Northwest side of Oklahoma City. Now Nancy is differently abled – she could understand the language as he was “speaking”, or signing. She could hear him as he talked. But others had to wait on a translation. Still, I think that even after they heard that story – as I did many days later – that they knew what was being said just like they were reading the signs themselves. As soon as she told the story I knew who it was who had signed those words, I could see his face and I felt my own heart warm in my chest. Once you have been to the school in Nicaragua and encountered these children, you understand that language has much more to it than just words...far more than sentences or phrases...language helps us to pass what is in our hearts to another person. It's like a song sung in a foreign language, even when you can't understand the words the meaning can come across clear as day...I can feel the sadness in the singing of “Vesti La Giubba” from Puccini even though the entire piece is in Italian, which I do not speak. There is a language that often works beyond words...that's what I think was the miracle of that first Pentecost.

Just like when I visit those kids at the Albergue, the disciples from all over the place found that though their words might be different they could understand each other very well. Whether you are in Northwest Oklahoma City, Jinotega or Timbuktu, a kind touch is still a kind touch, smiling eyes are still smiling eyes...and it is that effort that surpasses words that make real connections. We may find our deepest God moments come when we are reaching out to relate to one another – the longer we have to reach, the deeper the moment. And that is precisely the moment you don't feel quite as lost.

A blog that I read pretty frequently asked this question for the week of Pentecost: "How is the Holy Spirit at work in the world today? . . . in 100 words or less." This was the answer from Monica Coleman, Associate Professor of Constructive Theology and African American Religions at Claremont School of Theology.

*when we put the gospel
to hip hop
and host u2charists,
when we share the church building
with the Korean congregation,
when we preach against homophobia
when we break bread
with jews and muslims,
when the teenagers lead worship
on a regular Sunday (not just youth day)*

*when we invoke the ancestors
and learn from their lives,
when we live at the borders
offering water to those in the desert
harbor to those in danger
and community when we don't fit in. . .
it is then that we speak in tongues*

That's how I think that the Spirit is moving...in ways that push us out of our boundaries and make us reach to communicate...to hear beyond words...in ways that call us to passion about the Gospel but humility about our opinions. I think that the Spirit is present when we speak with conviction about our experiences but not with certainty about our conclusions.

John Douglas, from our 363 group sent out a message to the 363'ers this week. He said, in part:

I thought you might enjoy a "chat" I had with one of our clients on Saturday.

I had asked Jerry at our meal before last if he had any idea why the number of clients we were providing meals for was down and his opinion was the increased availability of food stamps.

Yesterday, he stated that one of the major reasons he attended our meals was the "people." He said the food stamps provided him with all the food he needed and getting some toiletries was nice and the food was good, but we were the "ONLY" people who provided meals, etc. that did not look down on the people attending because they were poor. He continued by saying his main enjoyment was the conversations and interactions he had with all of us. I quickly stated we acted that way because we were NOT better than any of them.

"ALL" of you deserve the credit by showing kindness in your own way for all of our clients and I don't mean just the volunteers who come to the meals.

There is a lot of work/donations etc, that goes on behind the scenes that come together to make this endeavor work as well as it does. It is a group spirit that is within all of you that permeates our efforts and brings some happiness to others!

It's a good story...and we have many more in this church. But it only became a story for two reasons. John (and the rest of 363's extended family) decided to walk out the door and serve others...and then John (and many more) decided to do a really miraculous thing...to stop and listen. Not just to serve, not just to be in the proximity of...but to actually communicate with

people whose day to day life is very different than ours. In other words, to extend the circle...to open the doors...to build the community of God by being in solidarity with people.

That's the voice of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that called to these lost disciples and pushed them from their well-worn ruts...provoking them to do a new thing...to extend the circle...to open the doors...to build the community of God by being in solidarity with people, by using the language that passes all language...the language of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit calls us to connect and create, to love and to learn, to make families – sometimes out of almost nothing, and to make us each more whole by joining together. That is why being like Jesus, or following the way of Jesus, is to be God enfleshed...God present in our humanity. When we look first to another person's humanity we are calling the Spirit among us, like a rush of wind.

So, where is the Holy Spirit moving among us today? How are we reaching out to our neighbor, to our community and to the world around us? We are teaching and learning, feeding and cleaning, repairing and building, praying and hoping, sitting and talking, being a shelter, providing a home, seeing ourselves as followers of Jesus in action, not just in contemplation. We are in this community making a difference. The thing is...we may not even know how miraculous that is until we look back at it, a long time from now. We may not appreciate the ways in which we have been changed and have changed others. We may not ever know what impact we are having.

It takes being involved, though. Even on those days when you're just on auto-pilot...because you never know where the Spirit moves and how that Holy Wisdom can shape things. Sometimes it's good to get ourselves lost...it's often the only way the Spirit can help us find our way home.

AMEN

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