

JOYFUL, JOYFUL
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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
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Text: Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

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

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

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

 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.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
 in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
 and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
 and signs on the earth below,
 blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great
and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the
Lord shall be saved."

Today is a very busy and joyful day at Valley. It's Pentecost, and we have this beautiful new installation. We're celebrating communion; you see the elements on the table. We're receiving new members and recognizing a graduation. And we get to enjoy not only the handbell choir but for the first time since the pandemic started, the chancel choir.

So with all that going on in worship, I thought it might be nice talk a little bit about worship in general—how we approach it and what it's supposed to be like. And I thought a good way to do that would be to start with an analogy.

One thing people often compare worship to is a symphony orchestra, where the liturgy is the musical score, the worship leader is the conductor, and the congregation is, not the audience, but the orchestra. What I like about that analogy is the fact that it really emphasizes the participatory nature of worship.

Because worship is not a spectator sport. It's not only about the people up front. It's about everyone. It's something the whole church does together, and no one is left out. The people in the pews are not just bumps on log. They don't just sit there passively receiving. They speak. They sing. They pray. They offer. They respond. They partake. They help create the experience of worship as much as anyone else.

So think of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which is one of my favorite pieces of music. Think of the way it builds toward the fourth and final movement. Think of that glorious moment when the whole orchestra launches into the "Ode to Joy." The strings, the woodwinds, the brass, the drums, the timpani—they're all playing their hearts out. The four lead singers and the full chorus are all singing at full volume. The conductor is up there working furiously to coax every last ounce of energy from each performer. And it all comes together in a single expression of joy and beauty and hope and wonder.

That's what worship is supposed to be like—all of us joining together as one; all of us working together to bring something into the world that wasn't there before—something transcendent; all of us held by one thought, one longing, one intention, one purpose—to glorify God and give thanks to the One who made us and sustains us in our being.

Not that we have that kind of experience every time we set foot in the sanctuary; and not that we're doing something wrong if we don't. We're talking about making a spiritual connection, not changing a light bulb. It's not a mechanical process. We can't completely control it. There's an element of mystery involved.

So most weeks we sit through the service, and it's fine, we get something out of it, but the earth doesn't tremble beneath our feet. We listen to the readings, we hear the message, we sing the hymns, and then we go home and do the laundry. But every once in a while, every once in a *great* while, perhaps, a Sunday comes along, and for whatever reason, worship lifts us out of ourselves and makes us part of something bigger.

And maybe it's only for a second or two, but even so, we're never quite the same again. The feeling stays with us—the feeling of standing on holy ground in the presence of Love with a capital L—and it gives us a quiet peace like nothing else can.

Years ago, I was serving a church in Upstate New York, and one of the members, who was not a real churchy kind of guy, told me a story one time about an experience he had had in worship many years before. The whole congregation was saying the Lord's Prayer together during the service when all of a sudden he became aware of all those voices speaking in unison all around him. And his own voice seemed to merge with that collective voice, like a drop of water merging with the ocean. But he didn't lose his particularity. He still had his own thoughts. They just seemed to be coming from a deeper place, a shared place, rather than his own separate mind.

And then the prayer was over, and everything went back to normal, and it was almost as if nothing had happened. Except that something had happened, some door inside him had opened, however briefly, and he never forgot what it felt like. He still carried that feeling with him years later.

It's hard to describe an experience like that. But maybe it was something like what happened on the day of Pentecost. You can certainly hear the echoes. God's people are all together in one place. And suddenly an unusual sound fills the entire house where they're sitting. A vivid and startling sense of God's presence settles over them. All of them are filled with the Holy Spirit. They're given the ability to speak and connect through their human differences to tell what God has done for them. And their lives are never quite the same.

I think that's pretty much the same story as the one that church member told me. And if it's his story, it can be our story, too, any one of us, even if we're not that churchy. For some of you, maybe it already is your story. Maybe you've already had an experience like that of your own—an experience that changed you. For others, maybe you're still waiting. Maybe you're still waiting to be swept up in worship, to be filled with the Spirit, to be lifted out of yourself and made part of something bigger.

Wherever you happen to be, I want to leave you with something. I was talking before about the Ninth Symphony and the "Ode to Joy." Two of the hymns in our hymnal are set to that tune, and they're both ones you probably know: "Christ is Risen, Shout Hosanna!" and "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee."

I asked Max this week if we could sing "Joyful, Joyful," even though it's not specifically a Pentecost hymn, because even so, the words speak to what today is about, and what worship is about in general: hearts unfolding like flowers; mortals joining the happy chorus; Love divine reigning over us; and joyful music leading us sunward. Amen, and happy Pentecost.