

The Unmanageable God

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

Whoeeee! How's that for a church service? I'm pretty sure we've never seen anything like that in this sanctuary. After all, we're Presbyterians! We do everything decently and in order. You know, I spent a few years worshipping in a Pentecostal church, where people raised their hands and said Amen out loud anytime they wanted to, and the preacher would pound the pulpit and shout at us and sweat, but even there, I ain't never seen no church service quite like this one in Acts - people with their hair on fire, talking languages they've never learned to the all the tourists in the town. Whoa! Just what in the world is going on here, God?

Let's Pray:

Holy Spirit, wind and flame, power that sweeps over the chaos, move within our hearts today. Breathe and blow, ignite our lives. Set us on fire. Give us a little Pentecost today, O Lord, that we may rise to be your Church, to meet your claim upon us in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of Almighty God. Amen.

I know, I know! I'm probably scaring you a little. This is a Presbyterian Church, you know. Don't take this stuff about Pentecost too seriously, Marjorie..... I mean, that story is about something that happened two thousand years ago, right? It's not about to happen here today, is it?.... Is it?..... I mean, that's dangerous! I know we're going to build a new building and all, but we don't want to burn this one down, do we? I know.... you probably came here for a nice proper Sunday service - decently and in order, Presbyterian style, right? Neat and tidy, all the corners squared away, manageable, comfortable, safe. Don't be talking no crazy talk about fire and wind. You lit all those candles, but that's enough now. That's as far as you can go.

Yeah, yeah, I know. We Presbyterians, we're not exactly known to be risk takers in the world of Church. In that way, maybe, you could say we're like those people... long time ago, on the plains of Shinar, who decided to build a tower. They wanted to make sure everything remained safe and secure and that everybody just stayed put—all in their rightful pews—and that everybody spoke the King's English. Well what's wrong with that? It sounds like a good plan, doesn't it? They just wanted to build a nice tidy city with a tower, so they could see far and protect themselves and make sure everyone stayed in line and in control ... I mean, isn't that the way to earn a reputation? "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower, and make a name for ourselves," it says in *Genesis 11*.

The problem was, they forgot that *God* had already told them to fill the world (*Gen. 1:28*) and be spread abroad (*Gen 10:18*). *God* envisioned the whole earth to be peopled with those who worship him, who bear the name of *God*..... You see, *God* had a plan that was mighty and amazing, beyond their known horizons - beyond their imaginations. So they decided not to listen. *God's* vision was too big for them. It was way too scary, too strange, too challenging. So they decided to stay put, to hunker down, to be safe and circle the wagons. They all spoke the same language because monocultures are easier to control, of course. And they built themselves a fortress to shield themselves from the call of *God*, to root themselves deep in one place against the push and the pull and the fierce wind of the Holy Spirit.

But what happened? *God* swooped in and knocked the tower down and blew them all to the four corners of the earth, and chaos reigned! Now what on earth did he have to go and do that for?.....

I dunno..... You're looking up here like you expect me to have an answer, but I don't know..... God just seems to do stuff like that.... unpredictable, unanticipated, unimaginable, unmanageable.

I mean gosh, think about it. The disciples had just come from their first ever congregational meeting where they voted in their new officer to replace Judas on the session... Let's see, here's how it goes in Acts chapter 1: 15...20-26. They cast lots—they rolled the dice! I know, it's some weird mixture of Presbyterian polity and Russian roulette, but now they're neatly back to 12 apostles, so they hunker down to worship with about 120 people present.....hmmm, let's see.....yep, about 120 people present—everybody in their own pew, looking for an encouraging word that will teach them how to live their lives, how to be a better person, how not to get arrested or—God forbid—crucified. And what happens? God swoops in and blows the doors off and windows open and somebody yells "fire!" and everyone starts running for the exits and all pandemonium breaks out and people start talking in German and Spanish and Matte and Dutch and French—even though some of them have never even heard those languages before! What in the world is God doing now?.....

You know, a lot of biblical scholars have studied these passages of *Genesis* and *Acts*, which come to us together in the lectionary today, and they see Pentecost as the reversal of Babel. Babel created confusion and chaos, but Pentecost, well, that's different, that's when there was calm and clarity and everyone nodded with satisfaction at a sermon well preached, sang the closing hymn and went home....unh unh!

If you read it that way, you've overlooked this little sentence: "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another '*What does this mean?*'"

This was not some planned part of the liturgy, some well-managed service where all the microphones worked perfectly and no one's cell phone rang at the wrong time. I mean think about it! One hundred and twenty people all talking different languages they didn't know they knew so loudly that all those tourists out there on the street - the ones who had come into Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost - all those people passing by heard the babble and caught some phrases in their mother tongue: Gotteswind, aliento de Dios, lichte van Christus, lumière sainte! This was a place of confusion and chaos—so crazy it seemed like they'd been partying a bit too hard at the breakfast table! "They're drunk!" people said.

You know, I just got back from a Preaching Conference in Nashville. Sixteen hundred preachers gathered to be inspired enough to return to their pulpits in churches all across the country, all across the world. There were preachers from Canada and Africa and Texas and Minneapolis and California and North Carolina. There were Methodist preachers and Lutheran Preachers and Episcopal priest preachers and American Baptist preachers and yes, Presbyterian preachers. And for one week we gathered to listen to the who's who of American preachers preach at us and lecture us about preaching. I know, a little crazy, hunh? As the very last preacher on Friday said, "What wrong with you preachers? You get a break, why don't you go to Hawaii?" (Humph! It was great! And let me tell you, preachers can sing! They just throw their heads back and open their lungs and praise God with all they've got! Man! Kinda like a little Pentecost for me.)

Anyway, Will Willimon was at this Preaching Conference and he preached to us. He said we tend to think of worship as a stabilizing activity, a place where you come after a stressful week. You had a hard time; you need to find some peace and quiet. Particularly if you're Presbyterian, this is a place where we do things according to the Book of Order, all predictable and safe. We sit in neat tidy rows, don't we? In pews which are actually bolted to the floor—you notice that? Fixed, solid, immovable—kinda like some of us are in those pews. I'm not mentioning any names—you know who you are..... This is my spot, dammit! Yeah, we come here to church because everything's in its place—predictable, secure, safe..... Really?! I don't know what book you're reading, but this book says from cover to cover that encounters with God are scary! Downright terrifying! They blow your socks off and set your hair on fire and make you walk and talk in ways you never dreamed about before.

Willimon says the difference between a living God and a dead God is that a living God can still shock you. A dead god is the projection of our own wants and desires and never asks anything of us at all. A dead god has a tendency to leave us be and never asks to change our lives. But a living God is one who provokes and destroys... and creates and enlivens. A living God is one who will not be managed or leashed. A living God promises Abram when he's 99 years old and his wife is 90, "You're gonna have a baby!" A living God tells that stammering shepherd Moses to go up to the king of Egypt and demand he let all the slaves go free! A living God tells a young boy to take a rock from the riverbed and kill that giant! A living God says to a young virgin, "You will be the mother of the Son of God!" A living God says crazy things like love your enemies! Pray for those who hate you!

Leave your mother and father! Sell everything you have! Give it to the poor! A living God says fear not! Take up your bed and walk! And Come, follow me! You came to church to be safe and comfortable? Boy, are you ever in the wrong place!

Yes, I know we're Presbyterian. I love the Presbyterians. I am one. And I know that Pentecost was about 2000 years ago...and I know, I know - Pentecost is for those other folk in those other churches who say Amen in the middle of the service and wave their hands in the air. That's scary stuff! It's terrifying! But do you know, we serve a God who is not interested in making us feel comfortable or secure in our pews. No. This is a God who loves us too much to leave us dead in heart and mind. This is a God who upends our efforts to make a name for ourselves until we understand that our name is *in God*. This is a God who will not leave us imprisoned in our towers of church polity and doctrine and liturgy that we hope will shield us from holy encounters, but this is a God who promises to pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, so that your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your young men will have visions and your old men will dream dreams, and when we pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done, we realize we're praying the riskiest prayer we can speak!

Hey, what would happen if we prayed for Pentecost today? Yeah, I mean here and now. In this congregation. I mean, I know we're Presbyterian and everything, but I just think, rather than try to stuff *God* into a box that we can get our arms around, what if we opened ourselves to the living, amazing, surprising, and unmanageable *God* of the Bible who has the power to take us by surprise, breathe fire and wind into us and push us out of our comfortable towers and padded pews into the world—beyond our known horizons, beyond our imaginations. Maybe if we prayed for Pentecost, we could become *God's* kind of people: galvanized, electrified, blow your hair back and set the world on fire kind of people. Now that would be a church service!