

“An Out of Hand Church”

Acts 2:1-21

Ben Johnston-Krase
Durham, North Carolina

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. - Acts 2:2

My childhood church had a Pentecost tradition of eating birthday cake after the worship service. Lots of it. Someone always decorated the fellowship hall with streamers and balloons, and tables and chairs were arranged into twelve seating areas, one for each month of the year. We were invited to sit according to the month of our birth, and together we sang “Happy Birthday dear church ...” and dug in. The birth of the Christian church was delicious and fun.

Looking back, I’m struck by the pleasant, tamed nature of those Pentecost observances. Chocolate cake? Yes, please. Violent wind? No thank you very much. Pleasant table conversation? Sure. Tongues of fire? Um, no. Rather, we’d like the full-bore, unleashed nature of the Spirit to be filtered and condensed for a user-friendly Sunday morning experience. Which is par for our course in so many ways, as our church pageantries are so often orderly, benign retellings of sacred stories too large and unkempt for the confines of our expectations, let alone our worship bulletins. The flood and the burning bush, the wrestling with angels and the lion’s den, the fiery furnace, dry bones rising up, a baby born to a virgin, thousands fed with a few pieces of bread, Lazarus walking out of that tomb, the stone rolled away ... It would be strange if the Spirit’s appearance in Acts were anything other than unexpected, unnerving, and completely upending.

Unexpected, unnerving, and upending: these are not things many of us are looking for in a church. When you imagine folks in your congregation inviting their neighbors to a Sunday service, you can call to mind what they’re definitely *not* saying: *It’s a blasted free-for-all in there. Week in and week out, we never know what to expect. Just when you think you know what’s going on, everything changes. Please join us!* Said nobody ever. This is not the church we’re looking for—perhaps because in a world *full* of that which is unexpected, unnerving, and upending, we’re not looking to God for more of the same.

Perhaps the church we’re looking for is something more like what we imagine the disciples were doing pre-Pentecost. We read that they’d devoted themselves to prayer, and in the closing verses of Acts 1, we learn that they’ve responded to the fact that Judas is no longer in the picture. So apparently, they’ve formed themselves a little nominating committee and elected a replacement disciple. Which sort of begs the

question, what else have the disciples been up to these fifty days? Did they approve a budget? Do they have a mission statement? I wonder if they've set some objectives with measurable goals? (Or are those goals with measurable objectives?) Perhaps they've formed a few subcommittees and task forces already and maybe even laid some groundwork for that first capital campaign. Maybe not. But certainly we see some evidence in Acts that these early followers have been picking themselves up by their sandal-straps. They're ready to work to make this thing go, to get some momentum behind their Christ movement.

In a world seemingly full of that which is unplanned, unnerving, and upending, it's understandable if we're particularly attracted to this part of the story—to thoughtful, industrious disciples with capable minds getting the church off to a good start. By extension, it's reasonable that we would also be drawn to modern-day versions of the same: religious moments and movements that project logical, calculated vision and steady competency and religious leaders who operate among us as astute strategist/gurus for the church's vitality and growth. Acts 2 says no to that and yes to a God who creates, redeems, and sustains with God's agenda and not ours. Acts 2 reminds us that the church is not our thoughtful creation but rather God's reality breaking into our own.

So honor the ways that our lives, our communities, and our world feel so undeniably unplanned, unnerved, and upended. Yes, on any given Sunday morning, our congregations gather not to *experience* a violent wind, but rather to *seek shelter from it*. Polarized communities and families, systemic racism, wars overseas, division in our homes, overscheduled lives, exhaustion, economic hardship ... this is the hard wind we face. And perhaps a big part of us just wants a church experience to be so pleasantly unlike the week/month/year we've been having. We might ask, can't we just have another round of Jesus calming the storm?

Honor that reality, yes. And then play with the story of a God who breaks into a chaotic world with holy chaos. A violent wind, tongues of fire, less-than-sober behavior ... could these exist in the narrative as signs of a God who is always hovering over the chaotic waters of this world and artfully drawing up that which is good? Could it be that the Holy Spirit did not birth the church to give us one more doggone thing to manage and do in this complicated life, but rather to usher in a reality ever-infused with a holy, windswept nature?

What are the stories and experiences in our communities that give voice to this untamed reality?

A friend of a church I once served worked as a fourth grade school teacher. She and her students had just finished a unit on C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first of his Narnia series.

She'd gotten a hold of a big empty refrigerator box and decorated it to look like a wardrobe. Early one morning, she brought it in and put it in an empty classroom just

off the school's library. Her students arrived and when they finished their last lesson, she told them that she had a surprise for them. "I'm going to take you to the land of Narnia," she said. She led them out of their room, down the hall, through the library, and into that room, empty except for the box. The kids came in, a few at a time, and walked into the wardrobe. Before long, they were lost in play as characters in the story. They were fawns and centaurs and elves and talking animals. And before too long, they got pretty loud! They made such a ruckus that the librarian finally had had enough. She came into the room and scolded the class. "The level of noise in this room is inappropriate!" she declared. "And I want it quiet! Don't you know where you are?" Well I guess the correct answer was, "a library," but one of the children peeked her head around the corner of the wardrobe and spoke up. "We're in Narnia," she said.

Carried away. Out of hand. I'm in Narnia! It's a fun way to imagine the church, isn't it? Carried away so much that we actually start believing and living the stuff we say, like love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, the first shall be last and the last first, don't worry ... These are not agenda items in an already over-scheduled life—they're Christ-born, Spirit-breathed realities offered for our being and believing.

One other story. Today we live in an age of viral videos online, or as I sometimes like to call them, "viral sermon illustrations." For better or for worse, we have unprecedented access to moments sacred and mundane that anybody with a video camera can post online for all the world to see.

One such video I love features a street musician named Tyler. Tyler the Guitar Man. Tyler has a long, scraggly beard, he wears a floppy leather hat, and he's got tattoos up and down his arms. His singing voice is older than he looks; it's deep and weathered with a few rough edges. Tyler the Guitar Man sits atop a small plywood box, and as he plays, he keeps the beat with his cowboy boots, stomping in time to the music.

The scene's not that unusual. A street busker playing a few songs, a few dollars lying in his open guitar case, folks passing by ... But there's a mom and her son. They've stopped and they're listening. The boy's name is Jacob. He's eight years old, he has autism, he is blind, and it is clear that Jacob is *digging* Tyler the Guitar Man! Tyler's playing that old Leadbelly song, "Midnight Special," and Jacob's rocking back and forth, back and forth ...

Let the midnight special shine her light on me

Let the midnight special shine her ever-loving light on me

Mom has one hand on Jacob's shoulder because with each back-and-forth he's inching a step closer to Tyler the Guitar Man. She's not sure. Is this ok? Maybe not, but Tyler doesn't seem to mind, so she lets her son get a little closer, a little closer.

Finally Jacob's right toe touches the plywood box. Back and forth, back and forth he's rocking, and Tyler the Guitar Man stomps his boots and keeps singing ...

Let the midnight special shine her light on me

Let the midnight special shine her ever-loving light on me

Jacob holds up his little hands, feeling the music in the air. And finally he does what we can tell he's been wanting to do. He touches the guitar. Mom tries to stop him, but she doesn't want to make a scene. And she doesn't *really* want to stop him, either. I mean, look at the kid! He's loving it! She quickly asks Tyler, "Can he touch your guitar?" And Tyler keeps playing, keeps stomping his boots, and just nods his head in time. "Yes. Yes. Yes." And then it happens. What you can see are three people: a cautious mother, a grizzled street musician, and a boy who is blind rocking back and forth, back and forth with his palms flat against that guitar. What you can only see if you look closely are the tongues of fire hanging above their heads, enabling them to speak to each other words of Spirit, words of grace ...

Let the midnight special shine her light on me

Let the midnight special shine her ever-loving light on me

Remind yourself and your people: the Good News of Pentecost is *not* that it happened. The Good and Gracious News of Pentecost is that it is *always happening*. Unplanned, unnerving, and upending? Yes. Out of hand? Maybe. But it is always happening—the Church of Jesus Christ is *always being born—again and again*. The question is not "Can you plan for it?" or "Can you make it happen?" And good heavens, it's certainly not, "Can you effectively manage it?" The holy question is, rather, "Can you put your hands on it and can you sing along?"