

## **Pentecost Sermon: “Stepping out in the Power of the Spirit”**

**Preached by Rev Laurel Barr in Roseville Uniting Church on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008**

### **Acts 2:1-21, Matthew 3:13-17**

I remember very vividly the day that my husband John and I brought our first child home from the hospital. At that time we lived very close to the King George V hospital in Camperdown so we wheeled her home in her new pram.

Arriving home in our flat, I remember our excitement, our pride and the sense of awesome responsibility all mixed together with not a small amount of nervousness. Placing her carefully in the middle of our bed we gazed at this tiny person and asked “What next?” | am sure many of you here resonate with such an experience!

Our lives are full of “What next?” moments.

This is true:

- for young children growing up and learning to walk and starting school,
- for adolescents spreading their wings,
- \*for adults choosing careers, falling in love, moving homes, as parents, as working people, as our children leave home, as people moving into and living in retirement , and as we grow old and face ever new challenges and decisions.

Interwoven and influencing all this is our journey of faith and discipleship as we seek to live out the calling of God on our lives.

“What next?” moments and decisions are not just confined to the lives of individuals. They are experienced by whole communities as we well know here in Roseville Uniting Church as we continue to develop our mission initiatives and building project. “What Next?” moments also apply to nations and to the world itself.

When we ask, “what next?”, our very next question is often “How? “ As John and I gazed at our new baby we were asking ourselves “How can we be good parents? “ This was certainly the case for the followers of Jesus as they gathered for the feast of Pentecost. These followers had been through a lot of “What Next?” moments: The decision when they left their homes in Galilee to follow the itinerant prophet and teacher Jesus of Nazareth; the years of sharing life and ministry with Jesus when every day brought new learnings and experiences; the excited hopefulness of Palm Sunday and the terror and pain of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Then as they hid wondering what would happen next and what they should do, the amazing surprise of the Resurrected Christ burst upon them. The risen Christ remained with them only forty days preparing them for yet another challenge.

In fact this next big moment would arguably bring the greatest challenge of all: Jesus’ ascension meant that he would become present to the world in a different way and they would never see the risen Christ again in the flesh. They would never again physically see Jesus who had been their leader, their mentor, their friend and now their risen Lord. Now they were on their own or were they?

With their focus well and truly upon what will happen next, the disciples and the whole community which included Jesus' mother and other women gathered each day in the Upper Room to pray. They were in a kind of holding pattern waiting for the promise of Jesus that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit, to be fulfilled. Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem where they would receive God's Spirit who would empower them to be his witnesses in the world

He left them a vision of themselves as the people of God who would embody Christ's ministry and mission through their own lives as they fanned out all over the world. It was a vision that was huge - exciting and frightening all at once and they must have asked, "How can we do it? How will we cope? Just how will this Holy Spirit promised by Jesus help us?"

The fears and anxiety unleashed by the crucifixion of Jesus still kept them watchful and jumpy behind doors. And that's where they were - behind doors praying during the festival of Pentecost when it happened.

It catches them by surprise, The Spirit comes as a rushing wind - filling them - inspiring them - enabling them speak in ways that communicated with people from all over the world.

And along with the wind came fire - not the gentle flame we see on the candles on the Communion Table but flames more like a bushfire as they experienced the transforming power of a God whom we cannot control.

For the fragile community of followers of Jesus who had gathered to pray, wondering "what next?", it was this Holy Spirit who fired them up, welded them together and propelled them forward where they had previously feared to go - Their "What next" question was answered as Peter felt the presence of God compelling.... emboldening.... and shoving him out the door to proclaim the Gospel to the crowds who had gathered outside.

The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost can be interpreted as a moment of initiation for the young church: Pentecost was a harvest festival but it also commemorated the giving of the Torah or the Law to Moses at a crucial moment in the history of the Jews in the wilderness after their Exodus from slavery in Egypt. That event had been a rite of passage or initiation that forged their identity as a people and now at this Pentecost they experienced another moment of initiation. .

IN her book *Reinventing Eve*, Kim Chernin the Jewish feminist writer speaks about initiation: I don't expect us to grasp fully what she is saying this morning but I am sure we can catch something of the gist of it and how it resonates with the Pentecost experience of the early church and with us in our own "what Next" moments.

*Initiation is not a predictable process. It moves forward fitfully, through moments of clear seeing, dramatic episodes of feeling, subtle intuitions, vague contemplative states. Dreams arrive, bringing guidance we frequently cannot accept. Time - sometimes year's pass - during which we know that we are involved in something that cannot be named. We wake to a sense of confusion, know that we cannot define the nature of what troubles us. All change is like this. It circles around, leads us a merry chase, starts us out it seems all over again from where we were in the first place. And then suddenly, when we least expect it, something opens a door, discovers a threshold, shoves us across.* (in Jan Richardson, "Pentecost: Fire and Breath", <http://paintedprayerbook.com/> 8/05/2008)

Out of confusion, out of dreams, out of prayer and dramatic profound experiences they couldn't describe in words, -the Spirit of the living God - transformed Peter and the others in that room at Pentecost. That

day the doors were opened and their experience of the Spirit “shoved” them across the threshold to face the city. The rest, as they say, is history - the early church was born.

Indeed the early church’s experience mirrored Jesus’ own experience in the Gospel reading today. Jesus had left Nazareth and his carpenter’s shop and family behind. He had responded to the call of God - but what next? Filled with the Spirit, who descended upon him like a dove as he emerged from the water of his baptism, Jesus was led first into the wilderness where he was tested before he began his ministry -a ministry, which was always empowered by the Spirit. Jesus was the Spirit-filled man.

Friends, the same Holy Spirit who was there at Jesus’ baptism and came sweeping in at Pentecost wants to live within us and amongst us. She comes as the Comforter and she comes as the teacher and the stirrer - to disturb us, to change us and to push us into new places where we do not fully understand the how and why - and we wonder if we can do it and what will be next.

Remember the baby eagles in our Children’s story. The time had come for them to learn to fly. They were afraid, uncertain, confused, more comfortable in the nest but as their patient yet persistent mother gave them a gentle shove over the edge and they spread their wings, the wind caught them and they flew.

In our life as a community and in our personal lives at every point when we wonder “What next?” The Spirit of Pentecost reassures us that “God is with you” and she beckons us forward. We cannot see the Spirit but we **can** feel the presence and power of God inspiring us, healing our brokenness, binding us together as the body of Christ in the world, gifting us to do things we did not think we could do. And as we look to the future, it is the Spirit who shows us God’s plans for our lives and who gives us visions and dreams to re-create the world as God intended it to be.

This year is the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Mother’s Day in the United States. Mother’s Day was born in rural West Virginia as a movement of social change. Anna Reeves Jarvis became aware of the poor health conditions in her community and she believed that Mothers were best placed to be advocates for change. In a bold move for a woman in her time, she stepped up and began a special day “Mother’s Work Day” to bring about better health for her community. During the Civil War she continued to work with women on both sides of the conflict, to encourage more adequate care for the wounded -and later worked for reconciliation between Union and Confederate families.

Fifteen year later another remarkable woman, Julia Ward Howe, a Boston poet, pacifist, activist for women’s right to vote and the author of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic”, wrote the Mother’s Day Proclamation calling for a Mother’s Day to work for peace and disarmament.

As we celebrate Pentecost on Mother’s Day, it is an ideal moment to remember that the Spirit was active within these women who dreamt of a better world and set about making their dreams and vision a reality. I wonder: How often they asked “What next?” How can some one like me really do much at all?

Today as you look back over the years, how many times have you asked: “What next?” “Where to from here?” “Where is this all taking us?”

Have there been experiences for you when doors have been opened and someone pushed you forward across new thresholds? How did that experience change you and shape who you are today?

How have these experiences deepened your understanding of yourself, your community and what God wants to do in you and to do through you?

Are we open to what the Spirit is doing in ourselves and in others? Are we open to what God is doing even now in this congregation here in Roseville with our mission initiatives among families and youth, our activities like Friday College and Friendship Thursday among seniors, in our Centenary Building Project, in our small groups? As our highly successful Market Morning closes soon: What next?

What new thresholds do we face as God's people in this changing world? Are we prepared to step up to the edge and spread our wings to be carried by the Spirit?

On this Mother's Day may the Blessing of Pentecost be with us all. Amen.

**Resources:**

Jan Richardson, Pentecost: Fire and Breath, <http://pintedprayerbook.com> May 5, 2008

*Seasons of the Spirit, Congregational Life* Lent.Easter p.145

Charles Arcodia, "Come to the Edge", *Stories for Sharing*, E.J.Dwyer, 1991, p.10

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