

### **Acts 2:1-18**

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’ <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup>‘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. <sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.



I have found myself feeling a little extra emotional this morning, which is usually a sign that I am preaching a bit too much to myself.

As I read the story of Pentecost this time around – of the Holy Spirit coming down like a great wind and tongues of fire – I most noticed the skeptics. As these early followers of Jesus were gifted with the ability to speak in all the different languages present – some were amazed and perplexed. And some were skeptical, thinking they must be drunk. I am sure the skeptics stood out to me because this is likely how I would have reacted if I had been there – I am usually suspicious of anything too new or too exciting. I like to think I would have simply been perplexed or amazed, but it is most likely I would have been critical and skeptical of what was happening.



It is amazing how two people can experience the same thing and have completely different reactions – one hears someone suddenly speaking in their native language and they are amazed, confused (yes), but also amazed. While another hears the same things and is skeptical at best, but pretty sure they must be drunk. Having the same experiences is no guarantee we will have the same interpretation of those experiences. That was an interesting thing I noticed when Jenna & I returned from Northern Iraq, as we were talking about giving different presentations about our trip – how we remembered some of the exact same conversations or experiences a bit differently – how different things stood out to us and impacted us. Two people who share a household and have very similar values, and still – our reflections and interpretations of the same experiences were quite different.

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we sometimes think of this as the birthday of the Christian church – after the ascension of Christ, the Breath of God empowers Christ's followers to carry on his message and work in his absence – what we have called that the Christian church. Birthdays and anniversaries are often causes to reflect – times to pause and consider what has

been and where we have come. And when we think about the state of the Christian church in our country, the numbers certainly paint a major state of decline

Only about 25% of Americans attend church regularly, and I read that this year between 4,000-7,000 churches will close their doors.

Only 6% of churches are growing, that leaves 94% that are plateaued or declining

We have 5 million fewer Mainline Protestants from 2007-2014

3 million less Catholics

I found this graphic to be startling – the huge decline of nuns in the United States – this shows not just people attending church, but people choosing the religious life – to give their whole lives to service to God in this way.



Largely, it is established churches that are declining, what the study I read defined as churches that have been around over 40 years that are declining (we just hit our 40 mark this year).

# THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH

<b>16.6%</b> ↓ DROP IN ATTENDANCE <b>IN 2010</b>	<b>15.4%</b> ↓ DROP IN ATTENDANCE <b>IN 2020</b>	<b>11.7%</b> ↓ DROP IN ATTENDANCE <b>IN 2050</b>
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Probably not many of us are surprised by these numbers – we see and feel this change all around us. Our own denomination of Mennonites is shrinking – with fewer and fewer people and fewer and fewer churches. At the end of this month Spring Valley Mennonite Church in Newport, Washington will be closing its doors after 94 years in the Pacific Northwest. With this comes smaller institutions – smaller budgets – fewer and smaller programs – smaller staffs. We feel this shifting landscape. Most of us in here probably had a time in our lives when almost everyone we knew went to church of some type or the other, while now, likely most of our friends do not attend church – especially for those of us under the age of 50. Many of you probably lived in cities and towns that, once upon a time, virtually shut-down on Sundays. Brian McClaren talks about being very aware in his childhood the first time the movie theater in his town was open on Sunday – for him, this represented a huge cultural shift away from a particular form of cultural/American Christianity.

And so we could look at these trends and say, “it is over, the kingdom of God on earth is coming to an end – we are past peak Christianity and it is all downhill from here!”

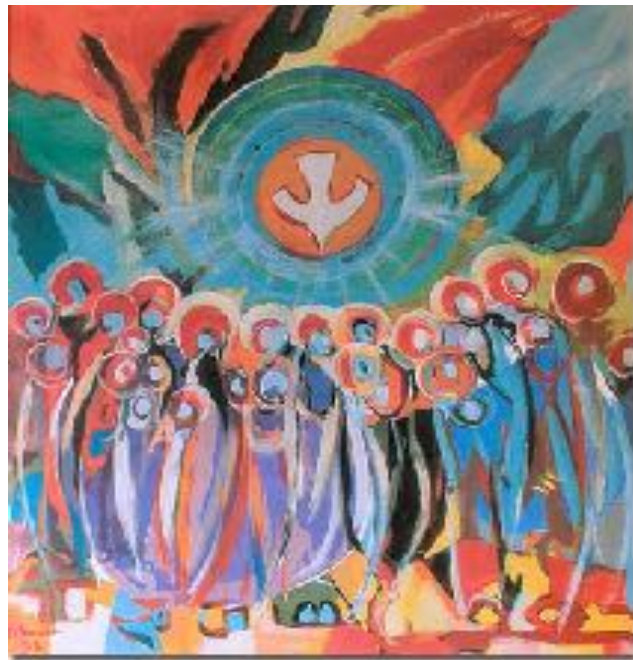
Or, on this day when we remember and celebrate the creative work of the Holy Spirit making something new, we might look at these trends and be amazed and perplexed and say, “perhaps the Spirit of God is doing something new; perhaps we are in the midst of renewal.” We might even say that, for the kingdom of God to thrive, the Christian church in our country needs to shrink – needs to be broken down and reformed by the fire of God’s Spirit.



A few months ago I was in a meeting with some pastors and other church leaders and we were we were talking about these shrinking trends and changes (some of you were there). And someone said, “what about those people who are working for justice and peace, shouldn’t they be attracted to our historic peace churches?” To which another pastor responded, “people who are working for peace want nothing to do with Christianity!” And I thought, if that is true (and in many cases it is), than perhaps it is time for our current forms of American Christianity need to die. And I do not say that lightly.



With the controversy over the appointment of the new CIA director, the question again began to rise in our country, do we support torture? What those polls have found time and again is that more American Christians support torture than non-Christians. When a people whose central figure was tortured and executed believe, “well, sometimes we have to torture people for our own security”, then perhaps, we have to say, it is time for us to be broken down and reborn.



And so, we might consider how things are shifting around us during our lifetimes and be awed and perplexed and say, “perhaps God’s Spirit is at work doing something new.”

I have talked before about the work of historian Phyllis Tickle who, in her book *The Great Emergence*, looks back over the history of Christianity concludes, “about every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale. And...we are living in and through one of those five-hundred-year sales.” They don’t all completely fit into 500 year periods, as change does not just suddenly happen one day, but begins to slowly emerge – and,

after a form has changed, it takes some time for that new form to emerge. She talks of these 500 year shifts.

**2000s – The Great Emergence (what we are going through now)**

**1500 The Great Reformation**

**1000ish Great Schism (east/west split of the Holy Roman Empire)**

**500 Fall of Rome (and she names a few other things)**

**0 Jesus – which she calls the Great Transformation**

And even before Christianity, there seemed to be some 500 year major changes. It was about 500 years before Jesus walked the earth that the nation-state of Israel fell to the Babylonians and the Israelites were marched off to exile in Babylon – perhaps the greatest crisis of faith in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

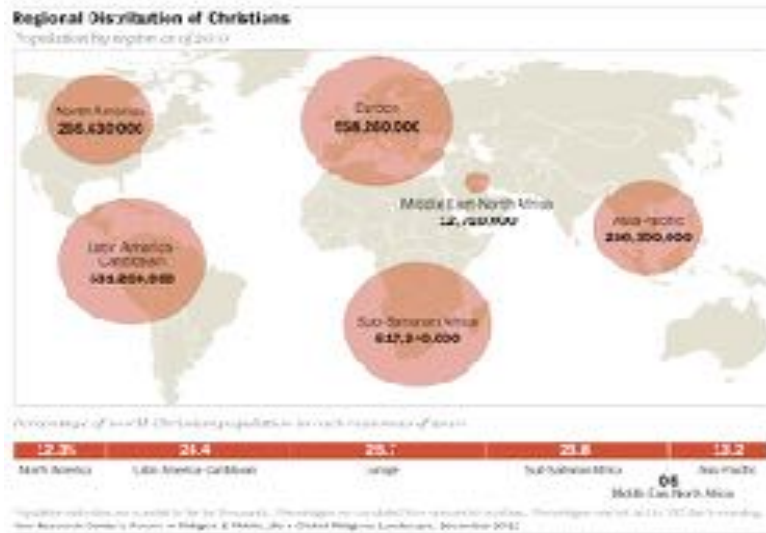
And 500 years before that were the first kings of Israel, what some considered the ‘glory days’ when the people of Israel had their own strong nation and the Davidic dynasty of kings.

If she is correct, than we might conclude that perhaps the Spirit of God is breathing something new in our midst – we just don’t know exactly what that will look like.





And if we look at global trends, while we know the Christian church is rapidly declining in the Western world, we also see that it is growing in the Global South – in parts of Africa and South America, and in parts of Asia.



And so when we look at this shifting landscape, we might too conclude in awe and confusion – perhaps the Spirit of God is doing something new. Perhaps the new leaders of the emerging Christian movement do not look like us – perhaps some of the great theologians of our day are unknown to us because they are not writing in English.



But of course, all transition has some difficulties, it is difficult to live through one of these rummage sales – to be part of the people trying to live in the midst of what should be kept and what should be tossed – to try and shape what is essential to following Jesus and what is not of God. I would assume that many of you are still here as part of the church because how we do church has largely worked for you – this is how I feel, the Christian church of my personal experience has largely worked for me, and so I am not too excited about things shifting and changing and shrinking. Because of this I am probably also not well-equipped for our transition. *But it is not up to me*, clearly things are shifting and changing. As things change and shift, there are always those who lead and join these movements, and there are those who put all they have into resisting these movements, into trying to keep things as they were.



And so, how might we live as people of faith during this time of shifting landscape?

[This is where I always get annoyed when I go to church conferences or talk with other pastors – 90% of the time is devoted to the “problems” or “challenges” that we all already know, and then 10% of the time is given to, “okay, now what?”]

For one, I think we have to help renarrate these trends, as I have tried to do just now, that maybe it is not that Christianity in America is dying, but maybe the Spirit of God is at work reshaping us away from a cultural and Empire-focused Christianity. I think we could all agree, without much debate, that many things that are credited to “Christianity” are not of God – that many Christian leaders in our country have moved onto a new path that has little to do with following behind Jesus Christ.

When I think about some of the great leaders of movements, they were not necessarily starting out to create something new – they were trying to help reshape and reform what they loved and valued. Martin Luther who we credit with starting the Great Reformation 500 years ago did not start out by saying, “Alright, I am starting a new denomination – who is coming with me?!” He loved and valued the church so much that he was trying to renew it and reform it – he was holding up a mirror to say, “look at all these things we are doing that have nothing to do with God – that have nothing to do with the Gospels – that have nothing to do with following Jesus. We must change this – I can do no other.” It was the rejection of and refusal to listen to Luther that made him the founder of a new movement rather than one who lead a renewal of the Catholic church. (I recognize this is a very simplified reading of a complex history).

There are those today who are trying to hold up a mirror to us in American Christianity, showing us that much of what we are doing and teaching and living is not of God. And it needs to be changed. There are those among us who so love and value Jesus Christ and the Christian church that they are trying to help reform and renew us. But we have to decide if we will listen and pay attention, or if we will reject them because it is too painful to look in the mirror. Many of these are the voices of the marginalized – those who have been rejected and pushed out by the church, but who still love the Christian church and want to serve it, despite the ways we have treated them. So, at least in part, this is what we must try to do during this time – to listen to those who the church has failed to serve these past 500 years, those we have pushed out and rejected, but continue to love us with the love of God.

And part of the good news for people like me, is that when the Spirit is doing something new, that doesn't mean the old completely passes away.

When the Protestant Reformation happened, the Catholic church did not go away – it was forever changed, but it did not end. Many of you here were nurtured in that form of the Christian story – Catholicism continues to form and inspire some of the most wonderful followers of Christ.

With the coming of the Christian church at Pentecost, Judaism did not go away – it was forever changed, but it continues today to form and instruct and inspire wonderful people of God who are about the work of God's kingdom.

Even as new forms emerge, for us here for whom this form works and gives meaning, it will not go away. But we will continue to be changed and challenged, and if we are open and don't hold too tightly – I think we will be changed and challenged in life-giving ways.



As we continue to live in this Emerging moment, let us seek to be a people who are open, who do not cling too tightly to what was and how things have been done, but open to where the Spirit might be moving. As we encounter those who are seeking to follow Jesus in fresh ways, let us not meet them with skepticism (as I am prone to do), but to be awed and perplexed.

As our institutions and churches shrink and change...Perhaps we are supposed to be a bit looser, a bit freer, a bit less constrained

As American Christianity shrinks...Perhaps it needs to be less culturally accepted;

Less associated with countries; Less associated with power and politics and militarism.



And perhaps we will know when we are becoming more in-line with the Spirit when we stop measuring the rise or decline of followers of Jesus based on numbers of buildings or budgets or numbers of butts in the seat – start measuring it by:

-The number of hungry who are fed, and less people who are hungry

-The number of people visited in prison and fewer people in prisons

-By the number of people who are giving their lives to serving the common good rather than serving the security and wealth.

-When we stop spending our money on studies of numbers of people and start measuring what matters in the kingdom of God.

This is clearly a time of change and discomfort for many of us, but I don't think many of us would say the times we were closest to God were when we were most comfortable, or the times we were most changed were when things were the easiest.

*Holy Spirit, come with power, breath into our aching night. Amen.*



