

John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

On January 22, I offered a sermon that Sunday that I called, "It Started at the Beach." I don't know if that stuck in your mind, or not. I suppose that, if you are anything like me, I'm not sure what I said a month ago, much less back in January.

The Gospel passage for that day was from Matthew. It recounted the story of the calling of Peter and Andrew and James and John. They were all on the shore, on the beach, of the Sea of Galilee. Peter and Andrew were throwing their nets, fishing, and James and John were tending their nets, repairing their nets, on their boat with their dad.

I remember that I wondered that day about when the church began. I drew a connection between that day on the beach and today, to Pentecost, which is the day that most people would say that the church was born. I drew the connection between Peter and Andrew and James and John saying yes to the call, which was the moment that the church took on life, and the day that the Holy Spirit labored the church into the world.

The church that was born on Pentecost, the church in the world that we celebrate today, had a three-year gestation period. It was a time, during which, it became what God planned for it to be. It grew from two people to four people to 12 people to many people, too many to count. It grew and took form over three years of development under the protective care of the one who was bringing them into existence so that today could happen.

Over those years, the church gained strength so that they could one day serve. Jesus fed them and pushed them to be strong and to endure, because endurance would be required. He showed them prayer, because prayer would be their nourishment, and He modeled for them character, because His character would become the features by which they would be recognized.

During those three years, they grew a heart through which they could deliver God's Love, the Love that Jesus had lived out right in front of them. A heart for the mission through which the blind would see, lame would walk, and poor in spirit would be filled.

And they grew in wisdom, a wisdom from outside of themselves that opened their minds, over those three years, to see the world, and to see themselves, in a new way.

And all along the way from that beach to the upper room in Jerusalem, many forces tried to bring their development to an end. Stones were picked up to be thrown, a crowd pushed them to the edge of a cliff, those in power devised ways to trap them into saying things that would kill their movement. They even hung Jesus on a cross so that the whole world within their reach could watch him, and hopefully his growing church, die.

Even the developing church itself flirted with miscarriage. They argued about who was greatest and who would sit at Jesus right and left. They complained that there were others, outside of their little group, that were doing miracles in Jesus name, and that they needed to be stopped. They rejected the woman at the well, tried to send away the hungry five thousand men and their families to fend for themselves, and attempted to block those bringing children to Jesus for a blessing.

But today, in due time, came. Tongues of fire. Rushing winds. Spilling out from their protected place into the street, proclaiming the Good News in every language for all to hear. The birth of the church into the world. And from that, we came also. The miracle of the life of the church.

But here is the thing that we, the church, must understand. With each generation, the church must be birthed again. Now, I'm not saying, as some might, that it must be birthed differently. I'm not saying that a new message must be found for our time. What I think is true, however, is that within each new generation, the same Gospel, the same experience with Jesus that formed the church in the beginning, must find its life in the church today. You might say that we have to go through our own gestation, in order to be the church in our time. And in order to do so, we have to find the answer to four sequential questions, questions that the original church had to answer for themselves, in order for us to be the church for our time in history like they were in theirs.

The first question is, "Who do we say Jesus is?" Peter answered that question for the disciples of his day. He boldly proclaimed in front of Jesus and anyone who would hear that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. And Jesus confirmed that by saying that that knowledge did not come from man but came from God Himself. Who does the church today say Jesus is? If we say something like a good teacher, or a compassionate pastor, or an all around swell guy...If we say anything short of the Christ, the Son of the living God; the way, the truth and the life; we are not being the authentic church for our day.

Once we answer the first question, we must then answer the second question. In relation to the answer to question number one, we must ask ourselves, the church must ask itself, who then are we. Are we good deed doers, or good thought thinkers, or good time havers? Are we members of a well-intentioned social organization, committed to it so long as that organization does what we decide it needs to do depending on our particular and changing desires in this particular generation, or are we followers of the Christ, disciples of the Son of the Living God, dedicated to what he taught and what he lived, not just for his generation but for all time?

Sequential Question Three: So, based on our answers to number one and number two, why are we here? Are we here to build an organization dedicated to the service of those who have the good sense, or good taste, or whatever, of accepting membership in it, or are we disciples, gathered together on the mission of the Son of the Living God, for the sake of bringing life to the world? Are we marketing and selling a product to those we happen to meet, or are we gifting a life to everyone who will receive it?

Finally, question four: Assuming that we are followers, disciples, of the Son of the Living God on his mission to the world, how then does the church act as partners on that sacred mission? Well, we live it out, together. Gathering each week. Encouraging each other on mission, helping each other in discipleship, embracing each other in fellowship, all for the sake of who we are called to be as the church for our generation and time. We are sent disciples on mission as sacred partners just like they were when they flooded the streets in Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago, just like the SHIFT study has reminded us over the past ten weeks, just like God envisions his church for all time.

In the weeks and months to come, I would like to invite us all to dedicate ourselves again to intentionally recapture our identity as the church that must be born into each generation, gathering together each and every Sunday, as sacred partners on a Godly mission, as disciples of the risen Christ. That is how we will embrace the true miracle of Pentecost for our time.

Amen