

Seeds of Amazement, Part 2

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Acts 2:1-21

Jeanette Settembre of the *New York Daily News* (January 16, 2016) writes that “The word ‘amazing’ simply fails to amaze anymore. It’s high time for someone to put a halt on the most over-used adjective in the English language. All we hear these days is: ‘This salad is amazing;’ ‘Your eyebrows look amazing;’ ‘The lighting for this selfie is amazing.’ It’s not... It’s amazing that those are just a few cringe-worthy examples of the word that’s (used in) the most mundane situations where everything is now described as ‘amazing.’ By definition, the word means overwhelming surprise or astonishment, but it’s overused and has become the ‘it’ word for millennials and celebrities who really mean to say something is ‘great,’ ‘cool’ or even just ‘fine.’”

Settembre tells a story: “Recently at a restaurant, I approached the host to let him know that I was joining my friends. ‘Amazing, go right up,’ said the twenty-something straight-faced and uninterested without looking up from his book. Clearly, there was nothing extraordinary about me being 15 minutes late for the 1 p.m. reservation. An ‘OK, great’ or a ‘sounds good’ would have sufficed. Maybe even a dirty look and a glance at the clock. The ‘A’ word has gotten so out of control, there’s even a Facebook page dubbed the ‘Overuse of the word ‘Amazing’ with more than 1,000 likes”

One more example: “During the Golden Globe awards...almost everyone who walked the red carpet was dubbed “amazing” by grinning broadcasters and other celebrities. ‘Wow, Lady Gaga looked so amazing! So happy for her,’ Kim Kardashian gushed on Twitter about the pop star who won her first Globe.”

With all due respect to Lady Gaga and the Kardashians or artisanal, organic, free range and gluten-free kale, both of which might be great or fantastic or even awesome, I prefer e.e. cummings who wrote “I thank you God for this most amazing day,” or a little “Amazing Grace.” But we can do even better than that.

Whether or not you remember the Easter sermon, you will remember the Easter narrative. This year it was from Luke’s gospel. One of the takeaways was a reminder to listen to the women. They encountered the risen Jesus and told the disciples, who did not believe them. Then Peter went to the tomb and discovered what they had. And he was “amazed.” Amazed. The Greek word has something to do with wonderment, meaning not only being impressed, but having your entire life experience impacted by what you have experienced. Wonderment and amazement seem like pretty good cousins when it comes to experiencing the resurrection.

What we do not automatically know is that it appears that Luke and Acts are of one piece. A two-part story, written by one author. You will note in the beginning of Luke's gospel a nod to a benefactor, named Theophilus. You will note in the beginning of the book of the Acts of the Apostles a similar greeting, including a mention of the first book, with Acts being the second book. Luke and Acts as one long narrative, linking the birth and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ with the birth of the Christian church and its earliest days.

That includes this day, the Day of Pentecost, some fifty days after the day of resurrection. We have just heard the account. All in one place, the earliest followers, when chaos descends in the form of mighty wind and tongues of fire. And if that is not interesting enough, the reaction cranks it up a level or two.

Our tradition is not a speaking in tongues tradition, but here is where that tradition is born. "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." And if we don't quite understand now what was happening then, it would be as if people from all over the world – Russia and Kenya and Iran and Iraq and Brazil and every other nation – and the disciples – let's say they were all from the same place, Rochester – were speaking languages they didn't even know in order for all to understand. Someone speaking Arabic and someone speaking Swahili and someone speaking French and someone speaking Mandarin and so on and so on, in order for all to understand.

Listen again to the explanation: "Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?... in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'" And then we hear that "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'"

Did you catch it...twice? Our word? Used twice to describe the crowd's response and reaction. Amazed and astonished, then later amazed and perplexed. It is notable that it is a different Greek word than in the Easter account, translated in the English each time "amazed." The implication here is that what happens at Pentecost is almost more difficult to comprehend than what happens at Easter. Astounded. Astonished.

We don't quite understand what is happening and even more so we don't understand what it means. Peter, there at the empty tomb and present at Pentecost, interprets it for the gathered crowd, then and now. This is the fulfillment of the prophecy, both what happens and what it means. Things happening in the sky and people – young and old – having dreams and visions.

And we continue to wrestle with that question – wrestle in puzzlement and wonderment, perplexed and bewildered, astonished and astounded. Not only at what happened, but at its deeper meaning. We continue to be amazed, at all its levels of meaning and its countless nuances and implications. Amazed.

We Presbyterians often have trouble with the Holy Spirit. On the spectrum of things, ours can be a more cerebral and intellectual approach to the faith. That is more than OK, and has served us well as we have crafted theological understandings of big things like life and death and sin and grace. And it has served us well as we have crafted ethical responses to social issues like education and poverty and race.

What that is not to say is that the Spirit has been absent when those understandings and responses have been crafted. What that is not also to say is that the Spirit is not present as we worship and learn in the styles we have traditionally practiced. What it *is* to say is that our perplexity about the Spirit, our some time uneasiness and discomfort, perhaps, at the emotional part of the faith spectrum, can limit the Spirit's work and therefore limit our experience of the Spirit.

We may never speak in tongues during a worship service at Third Presbyterian Church, but that does not mean we cannot be amazed by the working of the Spirit in our midst. When the Spirit descends upon us – and it does and it will – we can be open to its power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pay attention to what the Spirit does at that first Pentecost, and then discern what the Spirit can do now. If the primary work of the Spirit some 2000 years ago was allowing and enabling people to understand each other, when they were speaking strange and unfamiliar languages, what would that look like now?

What would it look like literally? That is not to say that we all learn Spanish or Arabic or Mandarin, though that wouldn't be all bad. It does mean that we do all we can to lift ourselves out of our racial and cultural and linguistic comfort zones to build an appreciation for the other, and more so a true understanding and relationship.

What would that look like personally, and relationally? We are in the middle of graduation season. As happy as families are, think about the relational paths they have been on to get to the point of a high school or college commencement. Or think about the paths any of us are on, as we move in and out of relationships and in and out of seasons in our own self-understanding. What would it look like for others to understand us as we truly and fully are? What would it look like for us to understand ourselves, when we look in the mirror, as we truly and fully are?

What would that look like culturally, or politically, or theologically? That is not to say that Republicans become Democrats or vice versa, or that conservative Methodists become progressive Roman Catholics or that National League fans become American League fans...heaven forbid. But think of all the ways that we are divided by where we live or what we look like or what we believe. And think of what those divisions are doing to our common life – in our culture and in our church. Pentecost didn't homogenize. Diversity persisted. But they understood each other, and that mutual understanding drove them to a common vision.

This is not speaking in tongues. It is fundamentally “all those things” – astonishing and astounding, puzzling and bewildering. To understand in the face of all the ways we misunderstand. To be understood in the face of all the ways we are misunderstood. To be known as we truly are and to know others as they truly are.

We celebrate the sacrament of baptism today. We believe that it is a sign and seal of what has already happened. The Spirit already claimed Karissa Rae – today’s baptismal waters just confirm that. Baptism encourages us, gives us courage, in the Spirit.

The course of the Pentecostal journey of understanding – ourselves and others, big picture and intimate picture – is set, only because God in the Spirit first knows and understands us, and claims us as we are so that we can live into who we are called to be. God’s vision becomes our vision. God’s dream becomes our dream. By the Spirit. That we fully comprehend this is not the point. That we are amazed by it is. Amen.