

Worry Pas

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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I love the imagery from Acts: wind filling the house; tongues, almost like a flame, appearing above each person's head; everyone being given the gift to speak in another language. It's a vivid story with each person being touched by the Spirit. No matter who they were, each was given this wonderful gift to do this amazing thing of speaking in a different language, as the wind blew through their hair, and as they perceived a flame above them indicating something very special was happening in their lives.

Even more than the images, I like how excited everyone in the room is; how amazed they are. It's what Paul calls the pouring out of the Spirit. And when it happens, look out.

When the Spirit is poured out, people will start to prophesy, meaning, they will begin describing a world that is 'closer to' God rather than a world 'separate from' God. Prophets challenge us to be far more than we are right now, and they will come at us from all angles until we hear the voice of God in what they are saying: to be more, to do more, to give more, to evolve, to be, to lift up, to reach out, to touch, to heal, to shout, to pray, to praise, to sing, and to shine as God's own. But, these people annoy us. They ask us to change. They ask us to open up, to let go, to breathe, to feel, to cry, to be frustrated, and to lash out. And when these prophets

come into our lives, it's not because we think we need them, it's because God thinks we need them. Whether or not we choose to hear it is another story.

Usually, when I've met prophets in my own life, I didn't like them. I thought them odd, off center, and without much they could offer me; and I wondered why this person was brought into my life. You may have met them too, because they just might be one of your favourite people now.

This congregation, our church, and our city, even our world hears the voice of prophets communicating in different ways. It's God's way of saying something's not right with this life, and we've got to get it back on track. Some call them environmentalists, others call them humanitarians. Often times they seek justice and equality, they call us back to God, and other times they simply remind us that this world is awfully one-sided against those who are not what everyone else is supposed to be.

The Spirit pours out with different languages - just as we gather as English speaking people and French speaking people here together today. We also speak different languages through the different beliefs and ideas we have.

When I am around people of different opinions, different beliefs, different thoughts and ideas, I find that I am opened up to a different world. Several years ago, I worshiped with the L'Arche community, where people who have mental disabilities can live a life in community rather than being isolated. L'Arche is a place that believes that beauty exists in every person. They believe that community is what happens when we are interdependent on one another, that each and every

person has gifts to contribute. L'Arche was where I met Ed.

“When L'Arche was beginning in rural Cape Breton in the early 1980s, they were urged by their neighbours on the Waycobah First Nation to welcome Eddie, a young Mi'kmaq man living in an institution. Ed's eventual arrival to the fledgling L'Arche community was a homecoming for him. Despite having to leave his home ten years earlier, Ed had never lost his Mi'kmaq language, or connection to his culture, but now, living next to the First Nation, he could again attend his own church on the reserve, participate in the annual Pow Wow, and run into his friends and relatives at the local gas station.

Ed remains, 25 years later, an important member of both communities - L'Arche Cape Breton and the Waycobah First Nation. He continues to speak his Mi'kmaq language and participate in First Nations rituals and ceremonies. And he nourishes the links between his L'Arche and the Mi'kmaq communities, kindling a desire in young people arriving at L'Arche from around the world to learn about this vibrant First Nations community.” (Written by Jen Power of L'Arche, Cape Breton)

One of the women at the gas station in Waycobah used to call me a name that apparently meant something close to “sun burn” in Mi'kmaq, which makes sense given how red my face and arms are today!

One of the things I have most enjoyed about being in a church like this one is the gathering of people it gives to me each week. Not all of you know each other, and I love the stories of someone being welcomed as if it were their first time, even though they've been coming

for years. We all have different beliefs in this church. Some of our people are born and bred Monctonians and New Brunswickers. Others have come from away. Some are conservative Christians with strong beliefs about the faith, and others tend to be to the left of that, yet take their faith no less seriously. Some are widows, and some are newly married. Some are grandparents, and some are pregnant. Others are part of everything in between. Some of you wear red on Election Day, some of you wear blue, some wear green, and some wear orange. I've yet to find a political party that wears plaid! The point is, it's a gift to be able to gather here and to listen to each other's voices - each other's language - before we form our opinions about something. There is opportunity to speak each other's language no matter of our beliefs, politics, or religion.

We all have an opportunity here, as Paul says, to see the ways in which God is at work in our world. Through people, through the earth, and yes I do believe through institutions like the church, as we proclaim the Word, as we reach out in mission, as we simply share in one another's lives, we can be as Christ to one another. There will be signs of blood and fire, smoke and mist says Paul. Blood and fire, smoke and mist - and that was just what happened between Montreal and Philadelphia fans this week!

You can kind of tell when you belong to a Pentecost kind of church - a church where there is some flame over people, a church where there is some passion for justice, and a church where people are excited. I hear from people in our church about how excited they are about our congregation - where we've been, to where we are. Alberta MacLellan told me last week that she

loves helping out with the WINGS program for young women because it makes her feel young again.

Biblical interpreter Kris Ostrem writes, “Words can never capture an experience of the divine. It was ‘like’ the rush of a violent wind. Divided tongues ‘as of’ fire rested on each and every one of them. Literally? No. Really? Yes. Even if words can’t convey the power of such an experience, one thing is for certain: when the Spirit blows through, transformation happens. And those tentative, fearful disciples experienced that too. They were changed. They were empowered with the capacity to speak in such a way that all their fellow Jews from around the world could understand what they said about Jesus. Now that’s empowerment! And transformation! The Spirit made the message clear. How it was received was up to the listener.”

In the Gospel, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, and do not let your hearts be troubled.” Since we are speaking about the mixing of language today, if Jesus were born and raised in Moncton or Dieppe, he might have said, “Worry pas.”

I read the following passage from John at every graveside service I do. As we sprinkle water at the beginning of life, at the end of life we use dirt. Standing on the grass, just before we sprinkle dirt onto an urn or a casket, these are the words of faith in the most final of places. “Be not afraid. Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” Christ still speaks this to our heart today as we face those moments and places when we know fear, and in some moments our fear can be transformed to faith.

I remember months back here in the sanctuary welcoming the SIDA/AIDS Moncton to be part of our worship service. The group needed a place to hold a vigil for those who had been lost to AIDS this year, if only to remind themselves and all of us that no one has been lost to the disease because we still love them. As the pictures of the men were lined up on the Communion Table, a candle was lit for each one. In that moment, it didn't matter who was a French Roman Catholic, or an English Baptist, or a person with no church background. What mattered was that a community remembered thirteen unique individuals.

St. Vincent's Hospital in New York is a landmark in the city, and is now closed. It is known for its care of citizens through some of New York's darkest times, such as 9/11. It also saw its greatest moment, and its darkest, in the 1980s as it found itself quite awkwardly in the thick of the global AIDS plague. The flood of patients was extreme, spilling into every available bed, then throughout the surrounding corridors where masking tape marked off virtual rooms.

"Every doorway you looked in was a young man lying in the bed, very, very ill," recalls Cynthia O'Neal, who first witnessed the devastation in 1987. She was moved to co-found the AIDS services agency, Friends in Deed. "It felt like a war hospital. It was very, very affecting, very powerful. I spent a lot of time in those rooms." However it turns out for St. Vincent's, condos or the wrecking ball, this history goes with it. As Cynthia O'Neal puts it, "It's unthinkable it not being there. It should be respected, what happened there in that hospital." (*New York Magazine*, April 11, 2010)

The hospital, despite its religious origins, had learned to speak a different language and became well-known for its care of AIDS patients. The Spirit's voice had called, and challenged this traditional, religious hospital with the care of those who had no one, and even less than no one during that time of fear. It became well known for caring.

Part of the message about the Tower of Babel is that people were building something out of just bricks and mortar. What was being built was a tribute to the abilities of human beings that gave no immediate benefit to the community.

This church has stood for many years as a place where we can come and be cared for by the Word, and with our faith renewed, we go into the world to care for it. This congregation has cared for itself through several crises such as fires, world wars, difficult economic times, and even internal divisions. At one point we had to ask ourselves if we were really listening to what the Spirit had to say, and we followed that vision down a few different paths. What emerged is a congregation more comfortable in its own skin, a church that has learned to relax and ease up on itself, and a group of people who celebrate what we do share in common, AND we celebrate what we don't have in common, and that has truly made all the difference.

It all begins with our belief in God, and in following the teachings of Jesus. We start again today as we remember the birth of the church. "What's the right way to come to believe in Jesus? Is it that we affirm that he was sent by God? Is, in some mysterious and wonderful way, God-present-among-us? Or is it that we see what he does, how he heals, how he forgives, how he

welcomes, and how he loves so much as to give up his life for us? Jesus says it doesn't matter how we come to belief. That we come to it, is most important." (Kris Ostrem)

Our church is not made of the bricks and mortar that surround us, beautiful as they may be. This community called St. John's is a community made out of countless bins of mashed potatoes scooped day in and day out in the Karing Kitchen, thousands of times a year. This community is made out of the hours of committee work, of small groups gathering, and of fundraising. This community thrives on the laughter of our children each week. It thrives on their questions and anxiety, and it thrives on their beliefs. This community is made out of the tears of people whose love has been transformed from beside us to within us, much like the Spirit, as Jesus says, the Paraclete, the one called alongside not to judge, but to simply suggest (and, yes, sometimes insist on) a different path.

On a serious yet humorous note, I want to leave you with this great quote from a woman who has been a prophet in my life, the Rev. Diane McVicar. She wrote to me when I was ordained. Diane was my minister when I was a boy, and she is now retired. She wrote in the card, "Listen always for the winds of the Spirit, and not for the puffing of people."

God be with you. God be with all of you.